

Technology

Brazil is taking the fight to fake news in the classroom

‘The aim is to teach students to identify fake news’

SAO PAULO: Brazil has taken a stand against the explosion of “fake news” stories swamping the internet by making media analysis studies compulsory for schoolchildren. Around the world, debates proliferate about the problem of unfettered information flooding social media, uploaded by people with no consideration for journalist ethics, impartiality or even the truth. Of particular concern is the effect such misinformation can have on those most impressionable.

“The aim is to teach students to identify fake news, and now it’s part of the national curriculum because the country has decided it’s necessary,” said Leandro Beguoci, editorial director at Brazilian education specialists Nova Escola. “The proliferation of social media networks have created an urgent situation in this respect,” Beguoci said.

Media analysis studies became compulsory in December 2017, but have been offered alongside traditional subjects like mathematics and history for years in some Brazilian schools. Kayo Rodrigues, 14, said the Brazilian press is not perfect, but plays a vital role in combating fake news “because not everyone has the internet or the tools to check facts.” She enrolled in the “Young Press” program launched six years ago in the Casa Blanca public school in Sao Paulo. At Casa Blanca, teachers Lucilene Varandas and Hildenor Gomes do Santos ensure their students, aged eight to 14, know not to take everything they watch or read at face value.

‘Think about clicks’

“When I receive a piece of information, I look for it on the internet and ask myself if it’s true,” said Helena Vital, 11, whose parents are teachers. She said the program has taught her to view the media from a different perspective. “Now I know that things aren’t so bad, the whole country isn’t going to collapse,” added Vital, who said that consuming news without questioning it “leaves people sad” and that “there are many negative things that aren’t true.”

The children do not have the tools to systematically check everything, but “they look at the articles, who wrote them, who could be interested in them and where they’re published, which are all ways of questioning the information,” said Varandas, who is looking to create partnerships with fact-checking agencies to expand the children’s education.

The measures seem to be working despite the children’s young age. “All it takes is one click to share false news; this project teaches me to think about my clicks,” said Rodrigues, daughter of a shopkeeper and a manicurist. The students enrolled in “Young Press” have also been analyzing local media stories about the project, and even found inaccuracies.

AFP was told its own coverage would be equally scrutinized. With a population of almost 208 million people, Brazil has a massive social media presence: 120 million WhatsApp users,

more than 100 million people on Facebook and another 50 million signed up to Instagram. “In the past, kids were taught by their parents, but now that happens through a variety of means, something which alters the role of the school,” said Beguoci, a trained journalist. “What’s so interesting in Brazil is that media and technological literacy are considered as important as classical literacy.”

‘Digital age natives’

Beguoci denies that information analysis is an additional burden on the education system, saying it rather offers “a context that can improve education.”

“We’re talking about things that are part of the student’s world,” he said. For Veronica Martins Cannata, who coordinates technology and communication studies at the private Dante Alighieri school, children have their own responsibility when it comes to fake news.

“Technology has facilitated communication, but the time has come to question its content,” she said. “As natives of the digital age, children and teenagers must take the responsibility to analyze that content before reproducing it.” Dante Alighieri has been analyzing media content for 11 years and has also brought the fight against fake news into the classroom.

Children are born “with ingenuity,” but at school they acquire “a critical eye and no longer



SAO PAULO: Students of Unified Educational Centers (CEU) attend a lesson on ‘Fake News: access, security and veracity of information’. — AFP

consume information in the same way,” said Martins Cannata. Such media analysis studies will not necessarily create a new generation of wannabe reporters, though. Vital, for one, is sus-

picious about the press that “is sometimes flawed in its credibility.” Asked if she would like one day become a journalist, Vital said: “I prefer swimming!” — AFP

Half of Americans trying to lose weight: Study

WASHINGTON: Half of the adults in the United States are trying to lose weight, according to a study published Thursday, with more women than men seeking to shed a few pounds. The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, conducted from 2013 through 2016, found that 49.1 percent of Americans aged 20 and older had tried to lose weight in the last 12 months.

A higher percentage of women — 56 percent — had tried to lose weight than men — 42 percent. Nearly six out of 10 women between the

age of 40 and 59 years old said they had tried to lose weight. Nearly 40 percent of the US population was considered obese in 2015-2016, a figure which rises to 70 percent if it includes those considered overweight. The survey found that it was not only people who were overweight who were looking to lose pounds. One-fourth of those surveyed who were of normal weight or even underweight had sought to slim down. The study found that the most common methods of losing weight were exercising and eating less food. — AFP

Online battles for the truth

PARIS: False information is saturating political debate worldwide and undermining an already weak level of trust in the media and institutions, spreading further than ever on powerful social networks. US President Donald Trump has popularized the term “fake news”, using it mainly as an accusation leveled at the media, and it is increasingly used by politicians from Spain to China, Myanmar or Russia. “Fake news” has been generalized to mean anything from a mistake to a parody or a deliberate misinterpretation of facts. At the same time, the proliferation of false online information is increasingly visible in attempts to manipulate elections, notoriously surrounding Trump’s 2016 victory.

Misinformation

Nearly two years after Trump’s shock win, debate is still raging on the impact of “fake news” on the presidential campaign. The build-up saw numerous examples of hoaxes and false news stories—one about Hillary Clinton’s alleged links to a child sex ring, another about the Pope purportedly endorsing Trump—which were shared massively and some believe could have swung votes to tip Trump to victory.

Misinformation had “a significant impact” on voting decisions, according to Ohio State University researchers, who questioned voters about whether they believed certain false stories. The researchers said it was impossible to prove that false information had changed the course of the election but noted it would have required a change in just 0.6 percent of voters, or 77,744 people, in three key states, to alter the electoral college outcome.

Since the election, Trump has denounced as “fake news” any information that displeases him while his aides have offered a mixture of truth and distortions, sometimes described as “alternative facts.” This has hurt the credibility of the US news media and led some to describe the current period as a “post-truth era”—an age without a shared reality. “The truth is no longer seen as important,” said John Huxford of Illinois State University, whose research focuses on false information, adding that “lies and fabrication even seem to bolster one’s reputation and political prowess among their core supporters.”

Eroding trust

In 2018, the average level of trust in the news, across 37 countries, remained relatively stable at 44 percent, according to a poll by YouGov for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. But Reuters Institute research associate Nic Newman warned in text accompanying the report: “Our data show that consumer trust in news remains worryingly low in most countries, often linked to high levels of media polarisation, and the perception of undue political influence.”

This is exacerbated by the spread of false information by authority figures. In some

countries this can go far. For example in Ukraine, where authorities staged the death of Russian journalist Arkady Babchenko on the night of May 7, Kiev said the move was justified to foil a real plot to assassinate Babchenko. The staging, broadcast in good faith by media worldwide, “is a godsend for paranoid people and conspiracy theorists. At a time when confidence in news is so low, a state playing with the truth in this way makes things even more complicated,” said Christophe Deloire, secretary general of journalism watchdog Reporters Without Borders.

Social networks in crisis

Many see Facebook as being the main vehicle for spreading false information in recent years. The Cambridge Analytica public relations disaster, in which Facebook admitted that up to 87 million users may have had their data hijacked by the British consultancy firm, came on top of widespread criticism of the social network’s propensity to spread and accentuate large amounts of completely false information.

In the US, many Facebook accounts and private pages that were managed by the Internet Research Agency, a Russia-based “troll farm”, were targeted by Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation into Trump’s campaign links with Russia. Facebook acknowledged on July 3 that it was facing multiple inquiries from US and British regulators about the Cambridge Analytica user data scandal, after its boss Mark Zuckerberg was grilled by the European Parliament and the US Congress earlier this year.

Under growing pressure, the US giant in 2018 stepped up efforts to communicate and improve technology for tackling false information. A third-party fact-checking programme, started in December 2016, now has more than 25 partners in 14 countries including Argentina, the US, the Philippines and Indonesia. It aims to “identify potentially false stories” circulating on Facebook and send them to fact-checkers to review. If an article is rated as false, it appears lower in the platform’s News Feed and reduces “future views by over 80 percent on average.”

One country where Facebook has invested in the battle against false information is Brazil, where there was a giant truckers’ strike last May. “While the strike was ongoing, a lot of audio was recorded with a lot of false information saying, for example, that in Rio it was impossible to find meat,” Cristina Tardaguila, founder of the Brazilian Agencia Lupa fact-checking organisation. “There was audio recorded by people supposedly connected to the organisation of the strike, but they were not.”

As in a growing number of countries, most of the messages during the strike were not spread on Facebook, but on WhatsApp, a messaging service with more than one billion global users, owned by Facebook. The rise in the use of messaging apps for news was noted in the YouGov report, which said that WhatsApp was now used for news by around half of the sample of online users in Malaysia and Brazil and by around a third in Spain and Turkey. “WhatsApp will be the platform of the fakes during the election,” Tardaguila said, referring to Brazil’s presidential polls in October. — AFP

First space tourist flights could come in 2019

WASHINGTON: The two companies leading the pack in the pursuit of space tourism say they are just months away from their first out-of-this-world passenger flights—though neither has set a firm date. Virgin Galactic, founded by British billionaire Richard Branson, and Blue Origin, by Amazon creator Jeff Bezos, are racing to be the first to finish their tests—with both companies using radically different technology.

Moments of weightlessness

Neither Virgin nor Blue Origin’s passengers will find themselves orbiting the Earth: instead, their weightless experience will last just minutes. It’s an offering far different from the first space tourists, who paid tens of millions of dollars to travel to the International Space Station (ISS) in the 2000s.

Having paid for a much cheaper ticket—costing \$250,000 with Virgin, as yet unknown with Blue Origin—the new round of space tourists will be propelled dozens of miles into the atmosphere, before coming back down to Earth. By comparison, the ISS is in orbit 250 miles (400 kilometers) from our planet. The goal is to approach or pass through the imaginary line marking where space begins—either the Karman line, at 100 kilometers or 62 miles, or the 50-mile boundary recognized by the US Air Force. At this altitude, the sky looks dark and the curvature of the earth can be seen clearly.

Virgin Galactic

With Virgin Galactic, six passengers and two pilots are boarded onto SpaceShipTwo VSS Unity, which resembles a private jet. The VSS Unity will be attached to a carrier spacecraft—the WhiteKnightTwo—from which it will then detach at around 49,000 feet (15,000 meters.) Once released, the spaceship will fire up its rocket, and head for the sky.

Then, the passengers will float in zero-gravity for several minutes, before coming back to Earth. The descent is slowed down by a “feathering” system that sees the spacecraft’s tail pivot, as if arching, before returning to normal and gliding to land at Virgin’s “spaceport” in the New Mexico desert. In total, the mission lasts between 90 minutes and two hours. During a

Virtual whale ride helps ease fear of heights: Study

PARIS: People who had lived with a fear of heights for decades became less afraid after virtual reality (VR) therapy that saw them riding a flying whale, researchers said recently. A specialized team that included psychologists and IT experts put confirmed acrophobes through their paces in a series of life-like VR simulations, after which all reported “a reduction in fear”, they announced.

VR-based treatments, the team concluded,

Canada rebuffs tobacco firm in big damages suit

OTTAWA: US cigarette maker Philip Morris suffered a setback Friday in a long-running suit when Canada’s Supreme Court denied it access to personal data on people suffering from tobacco-related diseases. Since 2001, British Columbia province has been fighting a legal battle against 14 tobacco companies—including



This December 3, 2016 handout photograph obtained courtesy of Virgin Galactic shows the Virgin Spaceship (VSS) Unity as it touches down after flying freely for the first time after being released from Virgin Mothership Eve (VMS Eve) in the Mojave Desert, California. — AFP

May 29 test in California’s Mojave desert, the spaceship reached an altitude of 21 miles, heading for space. In October 2014, the Virgin spaceship broke down in flight due to a piloting error, killing one of two pilots on board. The tests later resumed with a new craft. The company has now also reached a deal to open a second “spaceport” at Italy’s Tarente-Grottaglie airport, in the south of the country. Branson in May told BBC Radio 4 that he hoped to himself be one of the first passengers in the next 12 months. About 650 people make up the rest of the waiting list, Virgin told AFP.

Blue Origin

Blue Origin, meanwhile, has developed a system closer to the traditional rocket: the New Shepard. On this journey, six passengers take their place in a “capsule” fixed to the top of a 60-foot-long rocket. After launching, it detaches and continues its trajectory several miles toward the sky. During an April 29 test, the capsule made it 66 miles.

After a few minutes of weightlessness, during which passengers can take in the view through large windows, the capsule gradually falls back to earth with three large parachutes and retro-rockets used to slow the spacecraft. From take-off to landing, the flight took 10 minutes during

“have the potential to greatly increase treatment provision for mental health disorders.” With a virtual “coach” to guide people through treatment, the new method could offer a low-cost way of providing care to people who cannot afford or access a face-to-face therapist. The VR coach uses the recorded voice of an actor. Fear of heights, the most common phobia, affects one in five people at some point of their lives, according to researchers who published their findings in The Lancet Psychiatry medical journal. Most never receive treatment.

For the latest study, the team recruited 100 volunteers. Half were given VR treatment and the other half not, to allow for comparison. This was the first VR phobia treatment not to require the presence of a real-life therapist, said the team. “We designed the treatment to be as imaginative,

the latest test. Until now, tests have only been carried out using dummies at Blue Origin’s West Texas site.

But one of its directors, Rob Meyerson, said in June the first human tests would come “soon.” Meanwhile, another company official, Yu Matsutomi, said during a conference Wednesday that the first tests with passengers would take place “at the end of this year,” according to Space News.

What’s next?

SpaceX and Boeing are developing their own capsules to transport NASA astronauts, most likely in 2020, after delays—a significant investment that the companies will likely make up for by offering private passenger flights.

“If you’re looking to go to space, you’ll have quadruple the menu of options that you ever had before,” Phil Larson, assistant dean at the University of Colorado, Boulder’s College of Engineering and Applied Science, told AFP. Longer term, the Russian firm that manufactures Soyuz rockets is studying the possibility of taking tourists back to the ISS. And a US start-up called Orion Span announced earlier this year it hopes to place a luxury space hotel into orbit within a few years—but the project is still in its early stages. — AFP

entertaining and easy to navigate as possible,” explained study leader Daniel Freeman of the University of Oxford’s psychiatry department.

Wearing goggles and tactile gloves while standing safely on firm ground, patients moved around a 3-D world centered in the massive atrium of a computerized, ten-storey office building. The pre-recorded, 30-minute program sessions ran automatically, with the virtual coach explaining what the participants must do. Tasks included having to cross a rickety bridge, rescue a cat from a tree, perform tasks near the edge of a balcony, and ride a flying whale. The outcome after several sessions exceeded the researchers’ expectations. In self-reported feedback, “over three-quarters of the participants receiving the VR treatments showed at least a halving of their fear of heights,” said Freeman. — AFP

Rothmans, RJ Reynolds and Philip Morris-seeking reimbursement for the costs of providing health care for people suffering from such illnesses. The provincial appeals court had upheld a lower-court decision siding with Philip Morris’s argument that access to the personal data of affected patients was critical to the company’s ability to defend itself. Philip Morris sought access to databases regarding patients in British Columbia from 1991 to 2011, including on their medical costs and prescription drug use, the Supreme Court said in a judgment seen by AFP.

The nine high-court justices voted unanimously to overturn the judgments of the two lower courts. Justice Russell Brown, writing for the court, said the case had not reached the point

where production of the documents was necessary. Philip Morris’s expressions of concern about “trial fairness,” Brown added, “are premature.” The ruling will have an impact far beyond British Columbia, because other Canadian provinces have filed identical lawsuits against the tobacco companies. Together, the provincial governments are seeking Can\$120 billion (\$91 billion) from cigarette makers, according to Canadian media reports. Rob Cunningham, a lawyer with the Canadian Cancer Society, welcomed Friday’s ruling as an important step in keeping the legal process moving. “The objective of the tobacco industry is to delay the start of this trial,” he said. “They don’t want to have to pay tens of billions of dollars in damages.” — AFP