Fostering the truthful individual

Communicating media literacy in the comic Bamse

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Abstract

This study examines the construction of media literacy in a special issue on source criticism of the Swedish children's comic *Bamse – Världens Starkaste Björn* [*Bamse – The World's Strongest Bear*]. This is done with the purpose of understanding what values, perspectives, and practices are promoted when media literacy is communicated via children's edutainment media. Using narrative and discourse analysis, we problematise how notions of truth (such as post-truth) guide much of the discourse on digital media in today's post-political society, and how that and individualisation shape notions of media literacy. This is visible in the analysed case in how source criticism is constructed in relation to notions of truth and falsehood, and as moral lessons aimed at the individual media user. We argue that such an individualised, decontextualised, and depoliticised take on media literacy is problematic and an expression of neoliberalism and a middle-class gaze.

Keywords: Bamse, fake news, media literacy, post-truth, source criticism

Introduction

As the access to and use of digital media have increased, and so too worries about the spreading of fake news and hate speech, calls for media literacy have intensified, not least in relation to children (Carlsson, 2018; Lim & Tan 2020; von Feilitzen et al., 2011). Media literacy centres on the individual's rights to have access to media and communication technologies and to skilfully use and evaluate them (Carlsson, 2018; Hobbs, 2010; Pérez Tornero & Pi, 2011), but also on how contextual factors, such as policies, education, technology, and the media industry shape the possibilities for achieving media literacy (Buckingham, 2020; Livingstone, 2004; Wallis & Buckingham, 2013; Pérez Tornero & Pi, 2011). A central aspect of the discussions on media literacy is source criticism, the ability to categorise, verify, and question information. Another important aspect is reflection on one's own role in the public sphere and the need to use digital media in a way that is lawful and does not violate other people's integrity (Carlsson, 2018). In this sense, media literacy is perceived as an important democratic component, and the school system has been a central arena for the education and practice of media

Abalo, E. & Nilsson, J. (2021). Fostering the truthful individual: Communicating media literacy in the comic Bamse. *Nordicom Review*, 42(1), 109–123. <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0032>

literacy (Buckingham, 2020; Forsman, 2013; Kellner & Share, 2007; Martinez, 2019; Potter, 2010).

But what happens when media literacy, a highly complex phenomenon, is mediated as edutainment for children? Edutainment “is a hybrid mix of education and entertainment that relies heavily on visual material, on narrative or game-like formats, and on more informal, less didactic styles of address” (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2005: 46). This study analyses *Bamse – Tema: Källkritik!* [*Bamse – Theme: Source Criticism!*], a special issue on source criticism of the Swedish children’s comic *Bamse*. The study aims to examine the construction of media literacy in the *Bamse* comic book so as to understand which values, perspectives, and practices are promoted when media literacy is communicated via children’s edutainment media.

The comic book *Bamse – Världens Starkaste Björn* [*Bamse – The World’s Strongest Bear*] was first published in 1973, and *Bamse* characters have since appeared in multiple media and on various commercial products. *Bamse* lives with his wife and four children in a small town, and when problems crop up, he solves them through kindness and super strength – which he gets by eating thunder honey – and with the help of his friends. The stories are typically both entertaining and educational. *Bamse* has always had a didactical approach, imparting to readers the importance of education and being kind and fair. It seeks to entertain with exciting stories at the same time as it provides societal information and moralises about solidarity (Magnusson, 2005). The *Bamse* comic book contains more than actual comics stories, including letter pages, crafts, contests, and “Bamses skola” [“*Bamse’s school*”], which imparts information and lessons on societal issues. As such, *Bamse* can be contextualised (partly) within an educational comics framework, and as part of its mission to inform and teach children about society, several special issues have been published over the years. These are published in collaboration with regional or national authorities, as with *Bamse, Mim och Meles* [*Bamse, Mim and Meles*] (Egmont, 2011) – about immigration and the asylum process – and *Bamses må bra-tidning* [*Bamse’s Feel-Well Magazine*] (Egmont, 2014) – about health – and the one under examination here, *Bamse – Tema: Source Criticism!* (Egmont, 2018).

The aim and purpose of this study makes it intersect with two fields of research: studies on media literacy, and studies on comics as educational and popular media. Contemporary empirical studies on media literacy have focused much on the phenomenon in a school context, where the teachers, schoolchildren, and teaching context are of central importance. Martinez (2019) studies the promotion of critical digital literacy in Swedish leisure-time centres, with a specific focus on the leisure-time teachers. Festl (2020) studies social media literacy among German schoolchildren to understand it as a resource in their everyday lives. Aarsand and Melander (2016) study Swedish children’s media literacy practices both at home and in school. Leurs and colleagues (2018) examine a media literacy programme in a Dutch transition school for migrants. And Mackey (2007) explores pupils’ literacy across media texts in a Canadian environment. Deviating from this school focus is Hamburger’s (2011) study on media literacy in relation to film in Brazil and Livingstone’s (2014) study of children developing social media literacy by engaging with the particular affordances of social network sites. What these studies have in common is that they centre on the practice of media literacy rather than on how media literacy is constructed through specific media, narratives, and discourses.

Moreover, there is a limited body of research on comics as educational media in relation to *science communication* (Collver & Weitkamp, 2018; Farinella, 2018; Grootens-Wiegers et al., 2015; McNicol, 2017). Although illustrating the potential of comics for educational purposes, such analyses of comics as do not centre on the texts themselves. The same is true for studies that explicitly promote comics as potentially facilitating multiple types of literacy (Morrison et. al., 2002; Schwarz, 2002, 2006; Thomas, 2011; Williams, 2008). It is the use of comics in the classroom that is the primary focus in these studies as well, and the actual literacy that is being discussed mainly has to do with reading comprehension. One exception is the study by Schwarz (2006), who argues that the use of graphic novels in the classroom can also allow engagement with critical media literacy.

Our current study contributes to the understanding of media literacy by showing that – when mediated as edutainment for children, as in the analysed *Bamse* comic book – media literacy is highly shaped by specific notions of truth and is also highly individualised. This, which we argue can be understood as a middle-class gaze (Eriksson, 2015; Lyle, 2008) on media literacy, runs the risk of watering down its critical edge.

The next sections present the theoretical framework of the study, followed by an account of the study's methods and materials. We then present the results of the study and its conclusions.

Theoretical framework

Problematising media literacy in the “post-truth” era

Media literacy can be understood as “the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes” (Aufderheide, 1993: 6), which makes it a skill or an activity to which critical thinking is central (Potter, 2010). Although media literacy can be understood in a variety of ways, there is certain agreement on the following: media can have negative impacts on the user; media literacy can protect users from these negative effects; media literacy, as a skill, is something that needs to be developed; and media literacy involves several dimensions, such as cognition, morals, aesthetics, and emotions (Potter, 2010).

The analysed *Bamse* special issue is here understood as a means to promote and educate children in media literacy through children's edutainment media (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2001) in a historical epoch characterised by an increased circulation of information, most notably via digital media, increasingly challenged traditional media institutions, and intensified political polarisation in many Western countries. The circulation of so-called fake news, alternative facts, conspiracy theories on the Internet, the use of cyber-attacks for political ends, and the use of deceitful behaviour within mainstream politics have made some characterise our contemporary epoch as post-truth, a word that Oxford Dictionary named the Word of the Year in 2016 (Block, 2019; Farkas, 2020; Farkas & Schou, 2020). In such a context, media literacy practices such as source criticism become a way to provide tools for people, especially young people, to navigate in such an information-dense context and to be able to sort and verify information. However, without questioning the good intentions behind it, there is a need to problematise how media literacy practices are used for such goals.

On one level, it is problematic to try to solve the problems of fake news and misinformation by resorting to “the truth”. At the end of the day, who decides what counts

as a true fact or not is a question of power, and as Farkas (2020) argues, trying to solve misinformation with “truth” inevitably involves the suppression of information and positions, which in turn leads to a restrained democracy. Furthermore, Farkas (2020) illuminates that what is considered “fake” or not is not really a question of the validity of facts, but one of political control, which can be seen in the use of the slur “fake” to discredit political opponents. As boyd (2017) argues, citing Cory Doctorow, one must see the epistemological disagreement at the core of the discussions on fake news. Either you believe in facts as something based on independent verification, or you believe that independent verification is a myth or always flawed and therefore can be abandoned altogether. This epistemological disagreement is also interrelated with the existing political divide, about which source criticism or media literacy can do little or nothing. Instead, as boyd (2017, 2018) argues, the calls from media literacy proponents to question everything make people doubt what they see. Although this could provide awareness, it could also backfire and cause people to question established facts and institutions.

On another level, one must understand the production and distribution of fake news and misinformation from a wider societal angle. As Buckingham (2020) notes, fake news can to a certain degree be explained economically, as it is often produced as clickbait, which generates income. This, in turn, should make us shift the focus to the business of digital media. Furthermore, and echoing boyd (2017), Buckingham (2020) notes that fake news is a symptom – rather than the cause – of a polarised political climate, which calls for an analysis of the political sphere. Moreover, Zimdars (2020: 361) argues that although fake news is “part of a complex problem involving the production, distribution, and reception of various kinds of information, the majority of current ‘solutions’ to fake news deal primarily with reception and with individuals”. Furthermore, if fact-checking is not accompanied by a power-centred analysis of information, it may help to identify specific incorrect elements in pieces of information without necessarily helping people to see the bigger picture (Zimdars, 2020).

The attempts to make media literacy a solution to misinformation are, according to boyd (2018), expressions of the neoliberal focus on individual agency. It is then “up to each of us as individuals to decide for ourselves whether or not what we’re getting is true” (boyd, 2018: para. 28). This line of critique is echoed by scholars who have stressed that media literacy has become a neoliberalism-friendly alternative to regulation of the media market (Buckingham, 2020; Livingstone, 2008). Responsibility is then shifted from corporations to individuals.

Communicating media literacy via edutainment

Three things must be taken into consideration to understand the framing of media literacy messages in children’s edutainment comics: genre conventions, the sociopolitical context, and the mode of production.

In the case of the analysed comic book, the construction of media literacy, and specifically source criticism, involves constructions and adjustments to different levels to fit the comic book genre in general, and *Bamse* specifically. Comics tend to be described as a sequential art (see Eisner, 2008; McCloud, 1993), meaning that their basic building blocks are images and words set in deliberate sequence to structure what we might call graphic narratives (Thon, 2015). As a children’s comic, *Bamse* has a straightforward

narrative, and as Magnusson (2005) has shown, it is committed to careful and unambiguous narration, where clear and focused images are set in logical sequence and the verbal components clarify and enhance the narration. *Bamse* usually employs a very overt narrator, which is also used to comment on the plot, provide information, and impart lessons.

On another level, one must consider the sociopolitical context in which the comic book is produced. As Brienza (2010: 106) argues, “to fully understand any artistic work, one must also study the larger social and organizational context of its production and dissemination”. When *Bamse* rose to prominence during the 1970s, the comic book market was flourishing while dealing with demands for ideological awareness and political representations of contemporary society. At the same time, processes of standardisation and commercialisation were occurring, but because it was entirely controlled by its creator Rune Andréasson, *Bamse* was able to retain an original voice (Magnusson, 2005). This voice was generally didactical and ideologically leftist and could speak on a number of topics, including politics, but ever since an editorial board took over the comic book in 1990, *Bamse* was developed into a branded concept (Magnusson, 2005) with commercial imperatives.

Today, the political context is, however, different. In line with Farkas and Schou (2020), we argue that the increased warnings of a post-truth society must be understood as part of a post-political context, characterised by an apparent absence of ideological struggles and alternatives to neoliberal democracy (see Mouffe, 2005). Such a context surely also affects the production of messages on media literacy. In relation to this, we consider the concept of the middle-class gaze (Eriksson, 2015; Lyle, 2008) – used previously in the analysis of class representation – to be fruitful. The middle-class gaze is a mode of production that takes for granted the habitus and identities of the elite classes, especially in distinction to the popular classes (Lyle, 2008), and that has become part of mainstream media representations in neoliberal contexts (Eriksson, 2015; Lyle, 2008). Here, we understand it as a framework through which media literacy-related problems and solutions could be constructed in the comic book, which inevitably would foster a privileged view of these issues. This does not mean that this mode of production only addresses the middle class, but rather that it naturalises middle-class perspectives.

Methods and materials

Presentation of the materials

The comic book *Bamse – Theme: Source Criticism!* is a 24-page special issue published by Egmont Publishing (now Story House Egmont) in cooperation with Barnens bibliotek [Children’s library] in 2018, and it is based on materials from two *Bamse* issues published in 2017. The special issue contains two main stories – “Bamse and the Dark Forest” and “Who is the Thief?” – and two shorter “Bamse’s school” stories, related to the two main stories.¹ The section “Questions to think about!” (about half a page long) also connects with the two main stories. On the second page of the comic book, there is a letter to the reader followed by a section labelled “Tips about the Internet!”. The issue also has a full-page “Source criticism quiz” (with a separate section with the answers), as well as a minor section about working with source criticism and *Bamse* in school.

Figure 1 Cover of *Bamse* – Theme: Source Criticism!

Source: Egmont, 2018 (used with permission from Story House Egmont)

As stated in the studied issue, the idea for the two main stories, which were previously printed in regular issues, came from a teacher's conference. Three of the sections ("Tips about the Internet" and both "Bamse's school" stories) were created in cooperation with pedagogy scholar Elza Dunkels, and content was also created in cooperation with journalist Jack Werner. The special issue was sold to libraries and schools in Sweden, and a separate teacher's guide to use in schools is available for free download (Bamse, 2018). The teacher's guide was not included in the analysis because it is a different type of genre and centres on how to plan classroom activities around the comic book. The intended audience for the special issue was schoolchildren between the ages of 7 and 12 (Grades 1–6) (Serier i undervisningen, 2018), differing from the regular comic book, which is geared towards children aged 4 to 8 (Ekdahl, 2016). In 2017, *Bamse* was awarded the

Magazine of the Year prize from the industry organisation Sveriges Tidskrifter [Sweden's Magazines] for its original materials on source criticism (Egmont, 2017).

Method of analysis

In this study, we combine narrative analysis and elements of discourse analysis to examine the special issue of *Bamse* cover to cover. These two approaches serve to triangulate the analysis of the different subgenres and discourse types comprising the studied issue. While narrative analysis is used for analysing the stories appearing in the comic book, elements of discourse analysis are primarily used for analysing the other forms of communication in the comic book, as well as the lexical choices in the stories.

The narrative analysis employs analytical categories derived from comics narratology. Comics are seen here as graphic narratives (see Stein & Thon, 2015) that use multimodal devices to tell stories. Graphic narratives are both verbal and pictorial, and they use specific devices such as panels, speech balloons, narration boxes, and frames. The analysis deals with how these are drawn and organised, given the ambition to tell stories about media literacy and source criticism. This involves identifying key moments in the narrative, analysing what the relevant panels depict, how they are framed (or not), what the characters are doing and saying, and how narration boxes steer the plot and provide information. Also of relevance when investigating how the stories represent the stated themes of the comic book is the function of the narrator, which is concretised here as a narrating character (Thon, 2015).

Categories deriving from multimodal critical discourse analysis are used to analyse presupposition as well as the use of semiotic choices in relation to words and images (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The overall ambition is to identify how different choices, both regarding language and illustrations, serve to foreground specific perspectives and positions and background others. The analysis of presupposition seeks to identify "what kinds of meanings are assumed as given" (Machin & Mayr, 2012: 153) in the analysed sections. The lexical analysis involves analysis of word connotations (the loading of different words and what they are associated with), overlexicalisation (over-description and over-persuasion), suppression (backgrounding or omission of facts or events), and structural oppositions (how words implicitly or explicitly embody differentiation from other words and concepts) (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The visual analysis centres on the meaning potentials of different semiotic choices, and it more concretely focuses on attributes (the objects in the illustration), settings (the framework, colour, and background of an image), and salience (what is visually foregrounded) (Machin & Mayr, 2012). One should note that these visual categories were originally used for photographic images. However, comic illustrations also contain attributes and settings, make specific objects salient, and are interrelated with texts. This makes the analytic categories also useful for the analysis of the named sections of the comic book.

Results

The analysis finds that apart from source criticism, which constitutes the overarching theme of the issue, a central theme for constructing media literacy in the studied materials is the rumour mill. This theme constitutes the central topic in the comic book's two

major stories and is of central importance for constructing meaning around source criticism. Another way in which media literacy is approached, broadening the perspective from the narrow view of source criticism, is Internet conduct, seen from an imagined children's perspective. These themes, in turn, are shaped by narration and semiotic choices that are in steady dialogue with specific notions of truth, as well as specific assumptions about the relationship between media literacy and the individual. We argue that such constructions to some degree mirror the attempts to make media literacy and source criticism more accessible for an audience of children, at the same time as they serve to individualise media literacy and fail to transcend rigid notions of truth.

Constructing truth

The two main stories in the comic book both construct a certain relationship to truth through the use of the rumour mill as a central narrative focus. This is made clear by how the stories are plotted, by the use of specific framing techniques, and in the recurring appearance of an overt narrator.

"Bamse and the Dark Forest" tells the story of Lille Skutt [Little Hop],² a mailman about to finish his postal round. His last deliveries are in the Dark Forest, and when entering the forest on his bicycle, he immediately becomes scared of the dark. Suddenly, he hears a scary noise and sees a big shadow, which he interprets to be a monster. Fleeing, he encounters Bamse's father-in-law Brumme and tells him about the monster, which is now very real in his mind. We next follow Brumme, who accepts Lille Skutt's story as truth, as he visits Bamse and his wife Brummelisa to tell them about the monster. Bamse does not question Brumme's warning and decides to confront the monster. On his way to the forest, he encounters Lille Skutt and journalist Nina Kanin [Nina Rabbit] (who plans to write an article about the monster), and they enter the forest together. Realising that Lille Skutt never actually saw the monster, Bamse starts to doubt the veracity of the story, and they then find out the monster was only Herr Gris [Mr. Pig], who had roared in pain after being stung by nettles. Lille Skutt concludes the story by acknowledging he had spread a rumour that was not true.

The second story, "Who is the thief?", tells the story of Burre and his school classmates. It begins with Burre leaving math class to go to the bathroom, and then returning to class. His leaving provides reason for the other children to later accuse him of stealing Grävla's mobile phone. Burre pleads his innocence, but no one believes him, and the children – convinced it is true – spread the rumour that he stole the phone. However, when Grävla returns home, she discovers that her phone was there the whole time. The rumours are not acknowledged as such until an occurrence in the narrative shows that what was thought to be true is in fact false. In "Bamse and the Dark Forest", this revelation is deferred until the very last few frames, while in "Who is the thief?" one character (and thus the reader) is provided with the information earlier, signifying a narrative shift, where telling the truth after realising you have made a mistake is the driving force rather than the rumour mill. Thus, particularly in the latter story, the construction of truth is framed by questions of morality.

Both stories contain key panels which are used to place narrative emphasis on moments where the rumour mill and source criticism are acknowledged. One example from "Bamse and the Dark Forest" occurs just after Brumme has been told about the mon-

ster, showing him in close-up saying, “I wonder if Bamse knows about the monster?” (Egmont, 2018: 7). There is no doubt here that the monster is real. A similarly designed panel shows a worried Brumme, close-up, telling Bamse about the Dark Forest: “I just heard that a horrid figure is running around and scaring people there” (p. 8). These panels stand out because they lack any distinguishing background and are unframed, emphasising the character’s subjective perspective (see Horstkotte, 2015) and making what he says especially significant. In “Who is the thief?”, similar unframed panels are used to signify important moments in the story. One example has Vicki and Burre sharing an unframed panel. Vicki says, “You must have taken it”, and Burre replies, “I did not!” (p. 15). This panel is emblematic of how the narratives treat truth in terms of either-or, here represented by two opposing characters. Another such example is the panel where Grävla finds her phone at home and realises that Burre never stole it – a turning point in the story. Both Burre and Grävla now know the truth (as does the reader), but the power to do what is morally right is only in Grävla’s hands. Looking at these panels in relation to the narrative as a whole, one can see that truth is constructed as existing in a binary relationship with falsehood.

An overt narrator usually makes itself known through narration boxes or through characters’ directly addressing the reader in the two stories, and its function is to provide story information and normative commentary. The final two panels of “Bamse and the Dark Forest” show an embarrassed Lille Skutt realising he should have investigated things more carefully. In response to Nina Kanin’s statement that there are no grounds for a newspaper article, Lille Skutt concludes the story in the final panel saying, “Yes, you can write about how it can be smart to find out the truth instead of spreading rumours” (p. 11), while looking at the reader. This is the lesson of the story explicated directly (verbally and pictorially) by the main character, functioning here as an overt intradiegetic narrator. We argue that the overt narratorial voices in the comic are also a form of covert authorial representation (see Thon, 2015), even in the case of verbal expressions presented as characters’ speech (in speech balloons). The fifth page of “Who is the thief?” contains important story information. The narration box of the first panel states, “In school they continue to talk about Burre and the *missing* mobile phone [emphasis added]” (p. 17). By using the word “missing” instead of “stolen” – and thus not accepting the characters’ interpretation of events – the extradiegetic narrator gains certain critical distance from the action and complicates the otherwise rigid notions of truth constructed by the stories.

Finally, truth is a central theme in the second of the two short stories titled “Bamse’s school”, this one subtitled “Internet and source criticism”. The story starts with Lille Skutt reading on his laptop a piece of fake news and believing what he reads, that Bamse is finished and no longer powerful. Skelman [Shell man], a character associated with cleverness and science, asks Lille Skutt about the source of the information, something that Lille Skutt had not thought about. One of the panels makes an intertextual link to *UR School: Is it True?*, a television programme with the stated aim of encouraging source-critical thinking among children. Specifically, the story references five questions one should ask when reading something on the Internet (who, what, when, why, and how), and emphasises that it is important not to regard everything written as truth. The final panel shows two voles with a laptop saying how fun the Internet is and that everyone is going to believe that what they write is true. Even though there are several

examples where truth is mentioned in the story, it is still represented as a rigid concept in the sense that things are either true or not true. Lille Skutt believes something that is false. Skelman and the extradiegetic narrator know to question what is written online, but there is still a clear dichotomy between true and false. Finally, the voles know what they write is false, but everyone (except those who are media literate and source critical) will believe it is true.

Fostering the source-critical individual

An individualised notion of media literacy is constructed in different ways in the analysed comic book. On one level, one can see this in how the reader is addressed and in the expectations that the issue creates in the reader. For example, there is a letter that begins, “Hi! Do you use the Internet?” (Egmont, 2018: 2), which provides, among other things, some background information about the comic book. As the quotation shows, the reader is addressed personally as a media user, revealing that it is a *literate* child who is being addressed. Below the letter, on the same page, is the section “Tips about the Internet!”, with five recommendations for the child reader about Internet use, all of them addressing the reader as an individual. For example, Point 1 states: “If you encounter something online that you wonder about or that worries you, talk to an adult about it” (p. 2). Although inviting the reader to interact with an adult (more about this later), it is still the reader as an individual media user who is being addressed (using the Swedish word “du”, second-person singular). A similar address is visible in the “Bamse’s school: Rumour mill on the Internet” section, which intratextually connects the story “Who is the thief?” to an Internet context. In a school context, the teacher Fiffi instructs the reader from her classroom with a direct address (characters looking at the reader) about what could have happened if Grävla had posted her accusation on the Internet. In the last panel in the sequence, Fiffi is looking at the reader from a featureless white background, which places emphasis on the character’s serious expression and what she says: “Do not write mean things or gossip on the Internet” (p. 22). In this way, the moral lesson of the story is directed to the individual reader.

Individualism can also be seen in the ways in which specific knowledge and skills are presupposed from the reader, something that to some extent directs the lessons told about media literacy to the already skilled child, and to some degree also exposes a middle-class gaze. This can be seen in how the two main stories – “Bamse and the Dark Forest” and “Who is the thief?” – leave it to the reader to connect the rumour mill to source criticism and to a media context, when such a connection is not made explicitly in the stories. Furthermore, there are lexical choices in the remaining sections that presuppose specific knowledge from the reader. For example, the section “Tips about the Internet!” is introduced with a lead stating that “Elza Dunkels is a researcher at Umeå University and has studied children’s Internet use. Here you are getting her tips on the Internet” (p. 2). The information in the lead serves to provide credibility to what is communicated in the section, but it requires that the reader understands terms like “researcher”, “Umeå University”, and “studied”, and associates them with academic authority. Moreover, one of the tips provided on the same page calls the reader to “Report also if you see someone else being offended, for example if you see something racist. Feel free to ask an adult for help” (p. 2). In any case, the reader must know what is meant by “offended” (in Swed-

ish, “kränkt”) and “racist” to be able to act. Furthermore, the section “Source criticism quiz” (p. 12) provides a test with six multiple-choice questions with the alternatives “1”, “X”, and “2”. Alternative 2 is the source-critical alternative in all the questions, and the use of presupposition reveals that the reader is expected to have specific skills and knowledge. For example, the second question portrays Herr Gris as claiming that the moon landing of 1969 never occurred. Alternative 2 states, “Who is claiming this? Can you trust this person? I will search for more information on the Internet” (p. 12).

This source-critical alternative presupposes not only an already sceptical reader, but also one who knows how to search for information online and how to distinguish credible from less-credible information. Doing online searches about conspiracy theories like this one can lead to finding more information supporting the conspiracy theory. In a similar vein, some of the source-critical tips given in “Bamse’s school: Internet and source criticism” also reveal that a skilful user is being addressed. One tip asks if the information under scrutiny is “facts or just opinions”, and whether the intention behind the information has been to “spread opinions or facts” or to “make money” (p. 24). Here, the reader is supposed to know how to distinguish between the constructed structural opposition of facts and opinions and to identify commercial interests, something that requires specific knowledge and skills that are not communicated in the text. Such knowledge and skills require education and training, and their presupposition therefore reveals a gaze that takes a media-literate habitus for granted.

An individualistic take on media literacy is also evidenced in how source criticism is constructed as a personal skill in the section where the quiz answers are presented (p. 23). There, three distinct positions are constructed, depending on the number of times the reader chose each answer on the source criticism quiz. For example, readers who answered alternative 1 most of the time encounter a paragraph beginning with a sentence saying, “Unfortunately, you are not that source critical, but you can learn to become so” (p. 23). For readers choosing alternative 2 most of the time, the paragraph instead begins, “Congratulations! You are source critical” (p. 23). In this way, source criticism, instead of being constructed as a complex phenomenon that is ever evolving, is made into a specific skill-level that the individual either has or has not acquired, a binary not unlike how truth is constructed.

Moreover, the analysed material offers several instances where the child reader is invited to interact with an adult. Some examples of this have already been illustrated, and it can be further noted that the letter on page 2, introducing the comic book to the reader, ends by stating, “when you have finished reading this magazine [...] you can show it to an adult who needs to learn more about the rumour mill and source criticism”. At first glance, the call to interaction with adults can be perceived as a way in which individualised constructions of media literacy are offset. In this way, one could argue, media use is to some extent collectivised. However, it is still left to the individual reader to seek help from adults, at the same time as it presupposes that the child has access to an adult who is able and has the skills to help and who is not themselves part of the problem, involved in spreading misinformation, rumours, or hate online. In this way, the call for interaction with adults serves to individualise media literacy, especially if the practice is to take place outside the school realm. The construction is also one made with a middle-class gaze, which presupposes that the adult to be contacted has the sufficient time, interest, and skills to be involved.

Concluding discussion

This study has examined the construction of media literacy in the special issue on source criticism of the Swedish comic *Bamse*, with the purpose of understanding which values, perspectives, and practices are promoted when media literacy is communicated via children's edutainment media. The study has shown that the construction is shaped by discourses on truth and the individual; the implications of these results on media literacy are discussed in more detail in this section.

In the analysed comic book, source criticism is shaped by specific notions of truth in fruitful ways, in the sense that they invite the reader to question information, thereby not taking for granted the veracity of information accessed online. This stance can foster reflexivity, an ambition we sympathise with. Today, this is very important, and in this sense, initiatives like the analysed comic book can play an important democratic role.

However, the comic book uses devices and examples that emphasise simplistic and binary views of truth and falsehood. Conspiracy theories such as the so-called moon-landing hoax or the flat-earth belief can be falsified using different forms of evidence, and the fictional example in "Bamse's school: Internet and source criticism" – where a piece of fake news claims Bamse has lost his thunder-honey power – can be falsified using the inner logics of the stories about Bamse. However, not all fake news, conspiracy theories, and rumours are that easily debunked. And, most importantly, the labelling of some pieces of information as fake will not necessarily mean their rejection, regardless of the accuracy of the accusation. As Phillips (2020: 56) points out, one must understand "why a particular false claim is true to the person who believes it", and that "censorious fact-checking risks being heard only by already sympathetic ears" (2020: 62). Thus, media literacy requires a societal-sensitive approach, where information and media use are contextualised socioculturally and politically, and where children are also provided tools for understanding why misinformation circulates online (see Zimdars, 2020). Buckingham (2020) similarly argues for moving away from binary conceptualisations dealing with symptoms to taking into account a bigger, more coherent picture. We find such a dimension missing in the analysed comic book's take on media literacy.

Children's edutainment about media literacy should allow for more contextualised approaches to truth, evidence, and misinformation; these can also help children to understand why media literacy is important and can go beyond just acknowledging the problem of misinformation and leaving it up to the individual child to find his or her own way. On the one hand, one can argue that this type of contextualisation is difficult to provide to an audience of children, which would justify the true-false dichotomy used in the comic book. On the other hand, one cannot ignore that political contextualisation was commonplace in *Bamse* during the 1970s and 1980s (Magnusson, 2005). What this tells us is that in today's post-political context, explanations that challenge a "neutral" or "non-political" way of explaining things are suppressed, paving the way for the socialisation of children into a Manichean view, where things are either good or evil, true or false.

Moreover, it is important to stress that the question-everything approach to media literacy promoted in the analysed comic book is effective as an approach to combating misinformation only if one stands on the "right" epistemological side (see boyd, 2018). boyd exemplifies this problem with the now infamous Pizzagate, where an armed man who believed in the conspiracy theory of the same name showed up at a pizza shop to rescue children in captivity, only to find out that "the intel wasn't 100%" (boyd, 2017:

para. 12). What he was doing, argues boyd, “was something that we taught people to do – question the information they’re receiving and find out the truth for themselves” (boyd, 2017: para. 12). One can make an analogy to “Bamse and the Dark Forest”, when Bamse, loaded with thunder honey, goes to the Dark Forest to verify rumours about the existence of a monster. The difference is that Bamse, although fictional, stands on the “right” epistemological side and questions the rumours.

What this tells us is that this epistemological disagreement makes the individualisation of media literacy a dangerous thing. If we leave it up to individuals to question everything and find out the truth for themselves, we can only hope that the individual chooses not to do their “research” online and use that scant information as enough evidence to question established scientific facts on, for example, climate change. The problem, of course, is not the promotion of critical thinking but the individualisation, decontextualisation, and depoliticisation of it – thus its adaptation to a neoliberal and post-political context.

Such neoliberalisation fosters a middle-class gaze (Eriksson, 2015; Lyle, 2008) on how media literacy is approached. Through such a gaze, distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources of information is easy because one is highly educated, relies on the authority of academic experts, and shares the values of the established media and the political mainstream. Access to and use of digital media is not a problem, which lowers the threshold for children in such a class context to know how to use technology, and adults are likely able to help and guide their children. In sum, one possesses the prerequisites to stand on the “right” epistemological side, which makes media literacy a rather unproblematic, but also moral, thing. However, such an approach risks excluding less-privileged children, which, again, points to the risks of the individual-centred, neoliberalised approach to media literacy.

In the study at hand, we have examined only one specific case, limited to edutainment for children. We believe more research is needed on how media literacy is textually communicated, in order to understand which practices and values are communicated alongside it and how this provides tools for younger generations to tackle present and future information challenges.

Notes

1. All quotes from the comic book have been translated by the authors.
2. In cases where character names contain significant descriptive elements, we provide a translation in brackets after the first mention of the character.

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