

Introduction

As mobile technology, social media, and converged web content drive the new information economy, critical media education for a digital generation has become paramount. As a critical cultural studies educator committed to fostering critical thinking and informed engagement at all levels of ICT, I have created a framework of key questions and issues to formulate a critical pedagogy of digital media literacy education. The goal of my paper is to advocate for the use of this framework to lead us forward into the 21st century by providing meaning and purpose in our classrooms and communities for citizens and individuals to engage in transformative communication in the information age.

As part of a longstanding globalized movement, critical media education for a digital citizenship is predicated upon the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and produce media content and communication in a variety of forms. Rather than teach one-dimensional approaches for using media platforms, critical media education offers us a way to become digitally literate by providing us with the tools through which to examine the political, cultural, historical, economic and social ramifications of all media in a holistic way^[1]. While many media literacy approaches overemphasize the end-goal of accessing digital media content through the acquisition of various software, apps and analytics, I argue that the goal for comprehensive and critical digital literacy requires grasping the means through which communication is created, deployed, used, and shared, regardless of which platforms or tools are used for meaning making and social interaction.

Drawing upon the intersecting matrices of digital literacy, media literacy, and information literacy, I provide a framework for developing critical multi-literacies by exploring the necessary skills and competencies for engaging as citizens of the digital world. Specifically, I will present a “Top-Ten” list of questions that effectively propel our pedagogical efforts for critical digital literacy forward.

1) What does it mean to be digitally literate in the media age?

For some, the answer to this question means accessing and using the latest technology and apps to keep up with an ever-changing global market economy. Yet I argue that the motivations for this behavior uphold a bandwagon effect designed primarily to use technology for its own sake without analyzing the purpose and communication goals associated with using digital tools and platforms. As several scholars have forewarned, the technology industry manufactures a pedagogy of commercialization that prioritizes the acquisition and use of digital technologies for their own sake rather than for transformational possibilities that could emerge from the creative interplay of these forms outside of capital^[2]. Others advance technology’s inherent social possibilities to stimulate the creative production and distribution of content to create self-expression and social connections^[3]. I argue for a dialectical approach that carefully questions and examines the benefits of innovative, decentralized digital media that enable self, social and civic participation within a paradigm that values digital media for its transformative potential.

2) What do we mean by social with(in) social media?

If we want to answer the question, “What is social about social media,” we must examine human agency. Although the rise of Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, and Wikipedia offer collaborative information production, critical digital literacy means asking if virtual social media reduce interpersonal face-to-face sociality, and if so, to what extent and at what cost. I contend that it is not the properties of any medium that determine the social outcomes of communication technologies. Rather, critical digital literacy requires an assessment of the language of social media that interpolates us through signifiers, such as “fans,” “friends” “social networks,” “likes” and our “status updates,” so that we may determine whether networked social interactivity promote the engagement of meaningful human agency, or attest to our need to feel accepted in a digital culture.

3) In what ways have we moved from a homogenous society to a fragmented one?

In the 1970s pre-Internet culture, sociologist Herbert Gans made a case for the democratic value of cultural pluralism^[4]. Specifically, he called for media content that was less homogenized—less dominated by the television networks, large movie and record companies. His work resonated with those who thought media content was too mass oriented and that subcultural programming should accommodate different taste publics regardless of their size and economic standing. Without question, Web 2.0+ now offers cultural niches of all types for various audiences and fans. Yet followers of the Frankfurt School theorists Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer would argue that capitalism is using the same digital technology to market niche economies as part of a new Web 2.0+ business model, thereby fragmenting us beyond the ideals of connected society, or as Benedict Anderson would argue, an imagined community^[5]. As I'll explain in greater detail in my paper, digital literacy must grapple with the varied ways in which fragmentation enhances targeted marketing and fandom groups while reinscribing formulaic trends in homogenous ways to appeal to commercial trends and algorithmic imperatives^[6].

4) How creative and engaged are users of digital media content?

In their book *Groundswell*, Charlene Li & Josh Bernoff establish important data sets that provide a benchmark survey of online activity among adults age 18+ in the United States and in Europe^[7]. Despite all of the euphoric headlines claiming hyper-interactivity among a digitally literate society^[8], Li and Bernoff present us with a startling reality that documents that less than one-quarter of online U.S. and European consumers are “creators.” Creators are defined as those who publish a blog or their own web pages, upload videos or audio that they create, or post articles / stories that they write. Given these findings, I advocate for a critical pedagogy of digital literacy that inquires about the range and level of creative engagement of online users and content curators before presuming a particular utopian or dystopian view on educational technology.

5) What are the benefits and costs of “fun” and “play” in the digital world?

In his trailblazing critique of social media, Christian Fuchs describes the process of exploitation that defines the relational conditions between contemporary online media producers and distributors. In this new virtual playground, Fuchs explains how the “fun” and “play” that we partake in unwittingly enslaves us into producing surplus value labor and profits for large global corporations like Google, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube^[9]. I contend that critical digital literacy must include an assessment of the social, physical, psychological and economic costs and benefits of engaging in the digital world. My paper addresses the labor practices, working conditions, safety violations and rash of suicides within the Chinese factories that supply Apple's products^[10].

6) What impact will commercialization and consolidation of digital content have on information?

Given the consistent ways in which new media technologies have historically been colonized by capitalist forces over educational ones, I believe that critical digital literacy requires an assessment of the fundamental ways in which social uses of media are impacted by the capitalistic goals of profit and productivity. In my paper, I argue that a critical pedagogy of digital literacy mandates a fair and clairvoyant assessment of how digital content is affected by commercial and conglomerate providers of online and mobile networks. Addressing the opening of net neutrality rules that were meant to guarantee an open Internet would be instrumental in helping users of digital media understand the immense lobbying pressure of the corporate telecommunications sector as it seeks to alter the free-flow and equanimity of online data (Net Neutrality).

7) In what ways can Creative Commons promote and enhance collective knowledge publically and affordably?

Over the last decade, efforts have been underway to make use of distributive networks that allow others to freely or affordably copy, display, perform and remix digital works, provided that original sources are attributed. Founded by Lawrence Lessig eleven years ago, Creative Commons (CC) is the predominant public licensing initiative that provides a way for millions of global content

producers to choose a license that meets their goals and allows them to release their work under the terms of that license without registration needed^[11]. I contend that critical digital literacy curricula should be based on a praxis of media production and access that honors fair use, public domains, and creative commons as instrumental means to maintain collective knowledge and cultural participation by members of online publics.

8) What about privacy issues?

As I expand upon in my paper, critical digital literacy requires the scrutiny and application of best practices to ensure privacy. In addition to learning age-appropriate strategies for protecting online privacy, I argue that digital citizenship requires critically analyzing the ways in which governments and commercial online providers like Google and Facebook use surveillance of users and privacy violations to track user likes, purchases, behaviors, trends, and habits for social control or profit.

9) Within a globalized, pluralized, digital-enabled world, are we taking full advantage of our unprecedented access to varieties of taste cultures, political opinions, and worldviews?

I argue that we must assess how much progress we have made as individuals and members of social publics in embracing new forms of knowledge and global perspectives on a wide-range of important issues. I believe a critical digital literacy approach means asking the difficult question of whether or not we are using each medium for its revolutionary potential (McLuhan's global village), or whether we are retreating to a homophilic, narcissistic enclave of like-minded friends from our inner circles who like us for what we buy or where we take exotic trips^[12].

10) How can digital media serve education, democracy and human rights?

While the colonization of digital media by capitalistic forces is predominant, digital media have paved the way for democratic groups and educational movements to thrive, and have amplified the goals of human rights advocates from around the world. In my paper, I will provide several examples effective crowdsourcing campaigns that break free of the formal structures imposed by capitalism and the cooptation of ICT. In conclusion, while most mainstream media references focus on individualized and commercial uses of social media in apolitical ways, I argue that a critical pedagogy for digital literacy is well served by addressing the profound ways in which people can use technologies to advance the ideals of democracy and human rights in the 21st century.

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