



Navigation ☰

# Exploring Global Perspectives on Identity, Community and Media Literacy in a Networked Age

by Paul Mihailidis on [February 1, 2013](#) in [Article](#)

*Mobile technologies and social media platforms are reshaping how we think about community in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Today, youth are sharing content, opinions and ideas multiple times per day, every day, all day. Digital media have created opportunities to engage around common ideas, shared interests and civic goals. This paper explores how a global group of university students understands community in the digital age. It asks how students see the role that media education plays in community and civic engagement.*

## Introduction

“Our new intimacy with machines compels us to speak of a new state of the self, itself,” writes MIT professor Sherry Turkle. “A new place for the situation of a tethered self.”<sup>1</sup> The increasing ubiquity of “machines” — mobile, portable, connected — are re-framing how we think about community today. Citizens are increasingly using social media platforms, tools, and spaces for all daily information use. A 2010 study found that “eight- to eighteen-year-olds in the US spend more time with media than in any other activity besides (maybe) sleeping — an average of more than 7½ hours a day, 7 days a week.”<sup>2</sup> The Pew Center’s annual State of the Media report (2012) found information consumption habits in the US migrating towards digital platforms across all age ranges.<sup>3</sup> Around the world, the use of Internet and mobile technologies is growing exponentially.<sup>4</sup>

One of the largest impacts of this new media landscape is the integration of social media spaces into the communication habits of individuals all over the world. Citizens with access to new media technologies can now extend communication with little regard for physical proximity. As a result, an emerging participatory culture has created opportunities for communities to engage in collaborative dialog inquiry around shared initiatives, interests and pursuits. How individuals use these new tools are now key factors for how interactive communities can be.

This paper explores how a global cohort of university students sees the role of media literacy in community today. The university students in this paper were participants in the 2012 Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change. The Salzburg Academy is a global media literacy summer program focused on how media literacy can enable stronger dialog across cultures, across borders, and across divides.<sup>5</sup> The students were asked to complete reflections on notions of identity, community, and media literacy’s role in civic life. The written responses show identity rooted in a sense of place but community increasingly facilitated by mediated spaces. These spaces maintain dialog, cohesion, and sense of belonging that were once based on physical proximity.

The discussion below shows a clear opportunity to re-imagine the networked community as extending across borders, facilitated by digital media. Media literacy is the educational movement that stands to empower the next generation of civic voices in local, national, and global communities.

### **Networked Communities in a Digital Age**

In his new book, *The Connected City*, Zachary Neal sees communities of today as exceeding physical space.<sup>6</sup> In a recent interview with the *Atlantic* magazine, Neal states, “Communities aren’t disappearing, but to find them we need to stop looking in places, and start looking in social networks.”<sup>7</sup> Neal identifies three types of distance as central to the networked community. Networked distance refers to the number of connections between individuals. Social distance refers to the shared interests between individuals. Spatial distance refers to the physical proximity of individuals to one another.<sup>8</sup>

Networked distance now provides as much community space as spatial distance once did. And while spatial distance is still a core attribute of community mobility and vibrancy, it is no longer the main predictor of civic engagement. Eric Gordon and Adriana de Souza e Silva (2011) note that network communities ignore the common conventions of physical space. Rather, they have at their core shared networked spaces that digital media technologies provide. These networks offer new opportunities for interactivity, dialog and participation in communities large and small.<sup>9</sup>

It is still unclear in what ways network spaces will change the participatory nature of communities. Much argument and evidence has been put forth about the new opportunities for more engaged citizenship<sup>10</sup> and collaboration.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, pressing issues like participation gaps<sup>12</sup> and “communication-effects gaps”<sup>13</sup> between those with resources and those without extend further in a networked age. Nevertheless, as media continue to grow central to civic life, communities will increasingly rely on networked distance to facilitate daily interactions. How citizens use social networks to interact is now central to how vibrant networked communities become in a digital age.

Media literacy education aims to engage people in more active civic lifestyles. Based on critical thinking skills and the ability to access, evaluate, analyze, and produce information<sup>14</sup>, media literacy aims to teach evaluation and analysis, sharing and production skills, informed decision-making, and active participation in local, national and global dialog.<sup>15</sup> Learning how to communicate in peer-to-peer spaces and engage with public issues in large forums is at the core of media literacy education.

How citizens understand networks as civic spaces will determine how they see these spaces for vibrant community dialog. Below is an exploration of how a global group of university students see networked communities and media literacy’s role in them in a global and digital age.

### **Global Voices on Identity, Community and Media Literacy**

The Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change annually gathers aspiring media leaders from universities around the world to explore how media can encourage better dialog across borders, across cultures, and across divides. Students engage in digital storytelling, case study exploration, comparative media research, and problem mapping exercises. The aim is to build new pathways for media literacy education and global civic engagement. Since 2007 more than 320 students and 50 faculty members have participated in the Salzburg Academy.

In July 2012, sixty-eight students from eighteen countries gathered at the Academy to explore the role of media literacy in networked communities around the world.<sup>16</sup> Students were charged with launching innovative plans centered on helping communities use media to engage with civic issues. Organizers developed a three-step

narrative exercise to explore how students envision a sense of value and belonging in specific communities.

The three-step process began with a look at personal identity through a “me” story. Students were asked to compose a short narrative about themselves, who they were, what they valued, and media’s role in their personal identities. Once the “me” stories were completed, students were asked to compose “we” stories. These narratives asked students to define community, share examples of communities they belong to, and reflect on how media facilitated a role in their communities. Finally, students were asked to take their “me” and “we” stories and explore an “us” story. This narrative asked students to ponder how media literacy could enhance communities in locally, nationally, and globally.

The narrative reflections show the emergence of mediated spaces, platforms, and tools at the center of networked communities. The implications of these narratives point to a clear role for media literacy education in fostering the skills and dispositions needed to uphold diverse, vibrant, and interactive communities in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.

### ***The “Me” Story—Identity***

At the onset of their three-week experience at the Salzburg Academy, the students were asked to complete a narrative about their own identity. Titled the “me” story, this exercise prompted students to do the following:

- Explore who you are—Where do you come from? What are your interests and passions? What have been the experiences and people that have had the most impact on you and why?
- Reflect on what kind of media you consume/use—How do you engage with media, what role do they take in your personal life, in your identity?

Students identified themselves through nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, and family, and through the things they “do” from sports and hobbies to friendships and career passions. A majority of the collective identity of the “me” stories were about the people in the lives of the students. Events in their lives, whom they were with, the loss of loved ones, the gains of new relationships, and friendships framed a global identity of the students.

When asked to reflect on how media consumption facilitated personal identity, students pointed to the central role of social media in sense of place. “Media help strengthen my sense of belonging to my land and country and make me feel proud,” wrote one student from Lebanon. “Seldom is there time to keep in contact with the people I care about,” wrote a student from Slovakia, “I can observe their lives through social media.” A student from Peru mentioned how social media tools had helped her maintain an identity as she went away to college for the first time. “*Siempre comunicados* came as easy as *I love you* when saying goodbye to my parents. For my family, phones and laptops are tools to transmit information that can dispel distance.”

Students did not see media as aiding identity through *content* but rather maintaining a sense of identity through *platform*. With the exception of music, students rarely mentioned media consumption—films, television shows, books—as drivers of identity. Rather, most saw media as an access platform to help maintain their sense of identity when they leave the places and faces most familiar to them.

“Media has empowered me to go beyond boundaries. I use it as a tool to find different ideas, different points of view, different voices. It has given me the confidence to reach beyond my physical place,” wrote a student from Argentina. “My words combine with the words of others, read or heard, to produce a unique new combination,” reflected a student from the UK. “By capturing an image of people and places in my own unique way, I have found a way to communicate what I cannot put into words,” wrote a student from the United States.

The identity narratives served to build a baseline for discussions about community and media literacy. Students saw media as a platform to maintain and enhance sense of place and identity. They also saw media as equally beneficial for sense of community and belonging. “Technology and social media have strengthened community,” wrote one student from Lebanon, “in ways our grandparents’ and parents’ generations may never have known were possible.”

### ***The “We” Story—Community***

In the second narrative exercise, students were prompted to explore the idea of community. Two overarching questions guided their exploration:

- Mapping community—Define community in personal terms. Think of what communities you are part of and how you engage in them.
- Media in community—What is the place or role media plays in your communities? What impact do media have on your place in community?

“To me, a community represents a sense of belonging. This feeling could be achieved through shared culture, beliefs, and sense of security,” wrote a student from Gabon. This sentiment was echoed throughout the “we” narratives. Students mentioned community as “based on common grounds, thoughts, and likes,” “tied by emotional bonds,” and “a sense of belonging shared by a level of respect.” Communities were integrated into social networks, regardless of physical constraints. “Being part of a community shapes you,” remarked a Lebanese student. “Every group has its own character, standards, forms of behavior, interactions, and addresses.”

Networks played a central role in the maintenance, organization and reach of a community. “Social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram make it possible for us to talk, share pictures, and plan events,” remarked a student from the United States. “Social media bring us together for community events,” reflected a student from the United Kingdom. Students from China also mentioned the integration of social media into their community spaces. “[Digital] media has strengthened relationships within our community, not only with regards to work but also to daily life,” wrote one student. “In recent years, tools like Weibo, Renren, and other social apps change the way we are connected to our community,” echoed a fellow Chinese student. “Now how our communities function is from reality to the Internet and from Internet to reality.”

Across the world, students saw social networks as “tools to create new spaces where we can remain close and engaged with each others’ lives.” This shift shows new media spaces creating shared value beyond spatial distance when they are positioned to do so.<sup>17</sup> A student from Mexico mentioned social media as community channels that “fit perfectly with our way of life.” A student from the United Kingdom wrote, “Without immediate technologies that can be accessed from anywhere at anytime, it is likely our communities would weaken and possibly fall apart due to the geographical distance between us.”

Students were also keen to mention how social media extended community activism. Students mentioned using social media to “organize pacifist manifestations” and “to mobilize communities around the Internet using tools like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.” Others mentioned the ability to use media to organize community fundraising campaigns, promote minority organizations on campuses, and to advocate for social causes globally.

For the Academy students, identity was rooted in a sense of place. Community expanded beyond. They saw the social networks as providing an extended sense of belonging and inclusivity. The integration of networks in communities brings about the need to consider how well equipped individuals are to embrace networked spaces for dialog and interaction.

## ***The “Us” Story—Media Literacy***

The third narrative exercise asked students to explore how media literacy could help combat some of the challenges communities face today. Students were asked to identify the following:

- Challenges facing communities—What are the major needs of local and global communities today?
- Media literacy’s role in Community—How can media literacy help strengthen communities in local and international contexts?

Credibility, participation gaps, information overload, bias, trust, and accountability were identified as key challenges for networked communities. Students mentioned that because strong communities often have high levels of trust and reciprocity, individuals are prone to “not question the origination” of information and to stereotype “large masses of people doing the same thing.” This can challenge how communities maintain diverse and tolerant viewpoints. “Communities,” wrote one student from Slovakia, have the tendency to “accept information as true without thinking about its origination.” The idea that community members rarely “question where information comes from and what its objective is” was apparent throughout the narratives. Students saw this especially in global contexts. They found it quite easy to accept simplistic views about the “other,” as portrayed through media.

The challenges collectively reflected a ubiquitous media age. Analyzing the vast amount of information we now consume on a daily basis is hard if not impossible. People tend to trust in their peers and community members to help facilitate a healthy balance of information consumption. As the students endorsed the central role of social media in community, their narratives embraced media literacy as a movement to help strengthen community interaction and participation.

“Media literacy is a lifelong process,” a “constant state of being,” and a “critical competency,” wrote the Academy students. Students mentioned the need for people to distinguish bias in messages and to apply skepticism to all content they consume. Media literacy can help people to “step out of their comfort zones, to learn more about our cultures, different cultures, and about ourselves,” mentioned one student from Mexico. “We tend to feel secure in our communities,” mentioned a student from Lebanon, “where our messages are homogeneous and consistent. We can find a place to leave this comfort but still feel comfortable. That’s what media literacy can do.”

The Academy students saw media literacy as a competency to help people harness new technologies for networked communities. They saw media literacy as a way to bolster “curiosity in humans” to “ask more questions” and become “more involved.” This was a phenomenon in local and global contexts. These new media platforms disintegrated borders for information. Networked media literacy communities, to the Academy students, had the potential to help activate the voice of the voiceless around the world.

### **Empowering Communities in a Global Media Age: A Media Literacy Imperative**

The goal of the 2012 Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change was to produce media literacy action plans for communities around the world. These plans were born out of the “me/we/us” narratives. After the exercises were complete, students worked in groups to come up with media literacy plans that incorporated responses to the challenges they identified. Groups presented grass roots movements, social media campaigns, resource guides, in-school and after school programs, community outreach, library partnerships, and mobile app development to be implemented into communities.

The value of these outcomes lies not in their feasibility per se but rather in the collective acknowledgment of media literacy as a precursor for strong, networked communities. The recognition of a shift from spatial

distance to networked distance as the central attribute of community calls for media literacy education to help bring value and purpose to the new tools that are now enabling greater avenues for participation. The more citizens are able to use mediated spaces for dialog, the more they will have the opportunity to participate in their communities.

Three media literacy imperatives emerged from the 2012 Salzburg Academy program. These three imperatives can help re-frame media literacy for stronger networked communities today.

### ***Media Literacy as Individual Competency***

At the heart of media literacy education is active and engaged citizenship. This means not only teaching and learning about how better to analyze and evaluate messages, but also about how to create, communicate, share, and contribute to civic dialog.<sup>18</sup> Jessica Clark and Patricia Aufderheide (2009) outline five habits of engaged citizenship—choice, conversation, curation, creation, and collaboration—that can lead to more participation online.<sup>19</sup> Media literacy education should promote these habits as essential for networked communities.

### ***Media Literacy as Collaborative Competency***

Social networks have provided for easy peer-to-peer collaboration. Clay Shirky writes, “When we use a network, the most important asset we get is access to one another. We want to be connected to one another, a desire...that our use of social media actually engages.”<sup>20</sup> Media literacy must embrace collaborative technologies as more than ways to simply keep in touch, post status updates, and check in on peers. They are in fact tools that lower the barriers for civic participation.

### ***Media Literacy as Participatory Competency***

Finally, media literacy must work to reduce the participation gap. Participatory culture is at the heart of communities no longer bound by physical distance. Media literacy education must teach the skills young people need to participate in a digital media age. Henry Jenkins (2009) highlights the participatory skills—archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate—enabled by digital spaces.<sup>21</sup> Learning how to thrive in online spaces can create a fuller idea of participation online for citizens today.

Together, these three imperatives offer a framework for re-imagining media literacy as a core competency for networked communities in a digital age. With a stronger position at the center of new forms of engaged citizenship, media literacy can be the movement to enable “the people formerly known as the audience to create value for one another every day.”<sup>22</sup>

*Eye thumbnail image by Eric Freedman.*

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