

~ Chapter 2 ~

MEDIA LITERACY AND
MEDIATED COMMUNITIES:
EMERGING PERSPECTIVES FOR
DIGITAL CULTURE

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ON APRIL 15, 2013, during the 117th running of the Boston Marathon, tragedy struck in the form of two homemade pressure cooker bombs which exploded near the finish line, killing two people, leaving hundreds with severed limbs, and leaving a city in the midst of a frenzy of chaos and fear. While responders were tending to those injured, and security forces were securing the area, thousands of runners were left stranded across the marathon course, with no real idea why they were left standing in the middle of the road on the outskirts of Boston as the day dragged on.

As the information began to circulate, runners and crowds, clutching their mobile devices, heard the story unfold. Almost immediately, onlookers along the marathon route wanted to help runners to safety, and to contact their families. And concerned families wanted to be in touch with those stranded on the marathon route. As cell phone lines were spotty under heavy traffic, runners and their families turned to social media to communicate, collaborate and organize. Google's People Finder platform was used to help family and friends locate runners, and for citizens offering shelter, safety and warmth to the runners who were stranded (Ngak, 2013). Runners used text messages, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to obtain updates and information, and to let families and loved ones know they were safe. The Boston Police Department also used Twitter to communicate with the community in real time, offering important updates on the safety of Boston, and on the status of the marathon (Bindley, 2013). They also employed the #tweetfromthebeat hashtag to solicit any information or clues as to what happened at the finish line of the marathon.

A Pew Study conducted in the aftermath of the Boston Bombings found that over half (56%) of 18–29 year olds were following the events of the Boston Marathon on Twitter, and over a quarter of the general public turned to social media (Petrecca, 2013). Respondents mentioned the easy, fast, and diverse amounts of information available through social networks, and the ability to

engage in dialog and share information with one's own networks. At the same time, however, the fast and unstructured flow of information created challenges for finding credible, accurate and vetted information. Users on the social platform Reddit were spreading user-generated content so fast that it created a whirlwind of hearsay, rumors and false accusations. Multiple times in the week that followed the bombing, Twitter was transformed into a public forum for expressing racist and hurtful language aimed at entire cultures. Citizens following on social networks were often presented with a host of conflicting information and left to their own devices to differentiate fact from fiction, truth from hearsay. While these new connective platforms are disrupting the relationship between citizens, media producers, and daily information and communication flow, they are doing so in a rather chaotic and messy manner. As younger generations continue to employ social platforms for information and communication needs, how they utilize these tools and platforms will help determine their effectiveness in response to large-scale events like the Boston Marathon bombings and for communication in everyday life. This necessarily evokes the discussion of how best to educate young people for a future where civic engagement and community participation will increasingly be conducted in mediated, peer-to-peer spaces.

The Boston Marathon tragedy and civic response is just one of a growing number of ways that everyday digital tools and technologies are building ever more dialogic, interactive, and collaborative avenues for daily life. In this chapter, I will draw connections between young people, engagement in digital culture, and media literacy education. Media literacy, as both an educational and civic movement, promotes building individual agency—the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce effective personal and public communication—and social agency to actively participate in civil society on local, national and global levels. Through this lens, I will argue for media literacy as a new paradigm for active engagement in daily civic life. This will provide a framework that readers can reference as they explore in subsequent chapters the global case studies that show increased civic involvement through social media platforms and mobile technologies.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND MEDIATED COMMUNITIES

The digital landscape for young people today is continually expanding in both breadth and scope. What started in earnest in the mid-2000s, with the fast growth of Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn and Twitter, has quickly expanded to include a host of new technologies that are helping young people share, express, and collaborate in ever more specific ways. From the evolution of hyperlocal networks focused on communities of interest—Nextdoor, Gravy, Getglue,

Spindle, and Pintley, to name a few—to the ever evolving tools that promote the public sharing of information—Snapchat, Instagram, Foursquare—these new connective technologies continue to push the boundaries of our communication habits.

The increasing reliance on social networks for daily information and communication needs offers new opportunities to understand how young people engage in daily life beyond the traditional confines of physical space. Notions of community, which were traditionally rooted in the physical and spatial connections that brought individuals together (Jacobs, 1961; Lofland, 1973; McQuire, 2008), are increasingly adopting networked attributes (Benkler, 2005) and inhabiting virtual spaces (Fraser, 2005). These new conceptualizations of networked communities can offer opportunities for new decentralized collaboration and sharing of knowledge, information, ideas, and culture (Benkler, 2011; Glaeser, 2011; Lessig, 2008; Rheingold, 2003). Further, these networks engage people in a basic human instinct, one that Shirky (2010) believes is reincarnated through social media: “We want to be connected to one another, a desire that the social surrogate of television deflects, but one that our use of social media actually engages” (p. 14).

In *The Connected City*, Neal (2013) explores the concept of community not in the context of places, but in the idea of networks. Neal believes that spatial distance and physical distance still remain important predictors for strong community ties, but networks play an increasingly central role in community activity, vibrancy and engagement:

If we adopt a network perspective and look at the large numbers of varied social relationships that people continue to have, communities seem to be thriving in modern cities. Of course, this is not to say that they have not been affected by city life. For example, in the past, a person’s community might have included mainly those living nearby, perhaps in the same neighborhood. But, with fast transportation and cheap text messaging, it is now possible to maintain close connections with a community of friends and relatives, even if they live far away. That is, today *communities are networks, not places*.
(p.11)

Neal believes that if communities are seen in the context of patterns, and not places, it is helpful, in that “from that point of view, community is not a characteristic of individuals, but instead a characteristic of their relationships with each other” (p. 14). While Neal’s work develops the idea of community within the urban landscape, there are clear implications from this work that apply across demographics and geographies.

Mediated platforms that allow for the engagement of individuals in spaces of shared interest provide increasing opportunities for active engagement in communities large and small. Gordon and de Souza e Silva (2011) explore the

impact of social and mobile technologies on participation in the public sphere, asking how hyperlocal blogs, participatory apps, and civic networks are altering notions of who participates and from what space. Benkler (2005) notes that media spaces have transformed what participation means in the public sphere:

The Internet allows individuals to abandon the idea of the public sphere as primarily constructed of finished statements uttered by a small set of actors socially understood to be “the media” (whether state owned or commercial) and separated from society, and to move toward a set of social practices that see individuals as participating in a debate. Statements in the public sphere can now be seen as invitations for a conversation, not as finished goods. (p. 180)

The networks that support these new avenues for dialog are inherently peer-based and facilitated by communities themselves, not by top down organizational entities.¹ This connectivity, outlined in detail by Christakis and Fowler (2012) in their book *Connected*, can bring back the collaborative ecosystem that was mitigated by the anti-social structure of television (Shirky, 2010). Christakis and Fowler write that networks “help make the whole of humanity much greater than the sum of its parts, and the invention of new ways to connect promises to increase our power to achieve what nature has foreordained” (p. 286).

While networks do facilitate new large group dynamics for interactivity and connectivity, their value is dictated largely by the worth attributed to them by the individuals using the networks. That is, if people are unable to find apt motivation for using networks to connect across a range of diverse and engaging personal and public topics, the potential of networks will not be fulfilled. In *Net Smart*, Rheingold (2012) places emphasis on the digitally literate individual to dictate how useful, collaborative, and meaningful our networks can be: “...the future of digital culture—yours, mine, and ours—depends on how well we learn to use the media that have infiltrated, amplified, distracted, enriched, and complicated our lives” (p.1).

How we learn to use platforms, tools and technologies for engagement in daily life will play a central role in the use and value of those networks. The more people that can harness these tools for engaging, organizing and acting around shared interests, the more vibrant these spaces can be for communities today. Rheingold (2012) sees this knowledge as imperative for full inclusion in digital culture: “...the emerging digital divide is between those who know how to use social media for individual advantage and collective action, and those who do not” (p. 252). Based on the sheer abundance and exponential growth of these platforms, media literacy education is positioned to be the mechanism for fostering the competencies needed to flourish in the digital sphere.

The case studies that are presented throughout Part Two of this book all show, in different ways, how citizens leverage digital spaces to engage in activism around shared interests, whether they are responding to marginalization and oppression, or advocating for local community issues. These cases share the common attributes of committed individuals, but also of digital fluency that enables the use of social platforms to connect, create, and have an impact. Media literacy, positioned as the new civic education, can help to ensure that such engagement in civic life is a default competency for digital culture.

MEDIA LITERACY: THE NEW PEDAGOGY FOR ENGAGEMENT IN DIGITAL CULTURE

Coined over forty years ago, media literacy has grown from a concept used primarily in the mass communication context to understand how to analyze, evaluate, comprehend and produce messages (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993; Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 1998) to one that in the digital environment involves an ecosystem approach (Lopez, 2008) that incorporates sharing, expression, publicity, remix, appropriation, agency, and play. Henry Jenkins and his team, in their white paper *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture* (2009), develop a requisite skill set that places participation and engagement as the central factors for media literacy education. These also help reframe media literacy as an *active* endeavor that is applied to hands-on experiences with production, creation and expression, and not simply in a responsive context, where viewing and critiquing are central attributes of the process.

In an abundant media age, when young people around the world are spending more time with media, mobile technologies (Horst & Miller 2006; Internet Telecommunications Union, 2012; Neilson, 2012), and social networks, media literacy is about active engagement. In *Mediactive*, Gillmor (2010) captures this ecosystem, by welcoming us “to the era of radically democratized and decentralized creation and distribution, where almost anyone can publish and find almost anything that others have published” (p. xv). Media literacy, in this context, is about making sense of a messy, complex, and fast-paced media world. It is about critical analysis of content, of course, but increasingly about navigating peer-to-peer spaces at the point where news and entertainment, the personal and public, meet. This necessarily involves basic competencies in critique, analysis, and evaluation. It also must incorporate those notions of voice, belonging, participation and value that have come to define active participation in digital spaces.

I want to highlight two specific areas of connectivity between media literacy and mediated communities in digital culture—*Access, Agency and Belonging*, and

Participation, Value, and Spreadability—that can help position media literacy education as the core competency for civic engagement in digital culture.

ACCESS, AGENCY, AND BELONGING

It is clear that mediated platforms have provided the space and opportunity for engagement in communities large and small. At the same time, the proliferation of these networks and the activity within them has brought into question what it actually means to “engage” in community dialog today (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Diani & McAdam, 2003; Van De Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004), and how that engagement can be measured (Bennett, 2008; Buckingham, 1993; Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Gordon (2013) notes the disruption in identifying metrics for civic engagement in digital culture:

What does it look like to be civically engaged? Before the Internet, it often looked like reading the newspaper, watching local news on television, attending town hall meetings and rallies, and perhaps writing letters to representatives. But with the Internet, the terms and methods of being an informed and engaged citizen have changed. (The Civic Web section, para. 1)

The metrics for engagement, especially where young people are concerned, are indeed shifting. Dalton (2009) argues that citizenship today is facilitated through engagement (independent, connected, active citizens pursuing causes and combating injustice), more so than civic models predicated on duty (voting, paying taxes, military duty). Models developed by Bennett (2008) and Dahlgren (2012) have supported this shift, and Allan (2012) has called for efforts to think about civic engagement that move beyond “citizenship narrowly defined” and incorporate the new ways young people are using technologies to engage with their communities.

The plethora of new activism on large scales—the MENA uprisings, Occupy Wall Street, riots in Greece, the UK and beyond—exemplify the changing norms of how citizens relate to their communities. A data visualization of protests around the world created by Foreign Policy Magazine (Stuster, 2013) further shows the extent of activism we see from citizens around the world. Many variables contribute to such shifts, but one that cannot be ignored is the role of social networks in facilitating information and communication flow, and in the organization of large groups of interested stakeholders. The result is a host of new scholarship that shows how networked communities use social media to engage and extend connectivity (see Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Watkins, 2009; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010).

Media literacy's role in this new ecosystem for mediated engagement is to develop competencies in people that help foster more value-driven and purposeful engagement with social networks in daily life. If communities are increasingly forming in networks, and if those communities are depending on those networks for daily information and communication needs, then media literacy must help in developing *directional engagement in social networks*. By this I mean that engagement writ large is already present and evident across networks and communities of all shapes and sizes. What directional engagement entails is joining and participating in networks with a shared goal or outcome. Shirky's (2008) engagement ladder model, which moves from *sharing*, to *engagement*, and ending up with *action*, presents a relevant application of directional engagement. In his model, sharing is the beginning, where interested individuals come to together and offer ideas and information around a cause, with no direct obligation. Engagement is where they commit to a cause by trading time for participation. Action, lastly, is where their networked connectivity moves from online to a physical space.

Media literacy's support of *directional engagement* begins with the pedagogy of access. Access must come to be seen as a fundamental human right in digital culture: without access, there is no opportunity to participate. As a media literacy construct, access entails access to the content and spaces needed to engage in civic and community life, and the technologies that help facilitate such spaces. Media literate individuals who know not only how to share but where and to what effect will be better prepared to participate in causes large and small.

Agency, as an individual and social concept, is about helping young people understand how their personal behaviors in mediated spaces contribute to the digital public sphere. On an individual level, this means recognizing that what they say and write is public, shared, often with hundreds, and stored in the public sphere of the web. Their words not only matter, but also contribute to dialog. On a social level, agency includes acknowledging the ecosystem of family, friends, peers, and acquaintances that are exposed to our digital voices. While our time spent in social networks is seen as personal or isolated, we are embedded in a connected landscape. The responsibility that comes with this space must be recognized, as must the opportunity to engage with confidence, comfort, and insight. Extending ideas, opinions and information into networks of interest can help spur more vibrant debate, but it must start with understanding the agency we have to contribute and have a role in community.

Notions of belonging and inclusion often are what drive the dependence that young people exhibit in relation to their social networks (Mihailidis, in press, 2014b). Turkle (2012) applies the concept of "tethering" to explain the growing dependence youth have on networks. In *Alone Together*, she explores how young

people's new intimacy with technology is increasingly associated with self-centeredness. Recent research I have conducted with youth and social networks (Mihailidis, in press, 2014a; Mihailidis et al., in press) and with young people's use of mobile phones for daily information and communication needs (Mihailidis, in press, 2014b) shows decisively that the point of engagement for young people is when they enter into spaces of peers where they feel a strong need for belonging, and to be part of the "in" crowd. The results show that students are using social networks and tools to facilitate a majority of their daily information and communication needs, but do so in the context of social connectedness. As a result, their perception of the value of social networks skews predominantly towards keeping up with personal and social ties, and little beyond that.

In light of this rift in the use and perception of digital technologies, I advocate for media literacy to be a connector of sorts, facilitating the diverse and vibrant use of social media for personal *and* public uses, in ways that are transparent, directionally civic, and outwardly engaged. Engaging young people in such digital spaces must be couched both in a sense of relevance to issues that matter to them (Gerodimos, 2008; 2012), and that are integrated with their core social motivations for engaging in networks of interest. Scholars, from Dewey (1916) and de Tocqueville (1838) to Habermas (1989) and Putnam (2000), have long advocated for engagement in daily civic life to be situated in the context of community, the public, and social capital. In digital culture, these attributes are still core to community vibrancy but must be re-imagined in large, semi-anonymous, and diverse spaces in the ecosystem of the web's networks. Access, agency and belonging are three ways in which we can reconceptualize the point of engagement in mediated spaces to offer more relatable and relevant civic participation for communities increasingly functioning in mediated spaces.

PARTICIPATION, VALUE, AND SPREADABILITY

Directional engagement, beyond the point of contact, must be sustained by those members who engage within digital platforms. Here media literacy must embrace the competencies and dispositions needed to effectively participate in issues through the spaces afforded by mediated technologies. Hobbs (2010) sees this participation as a central facet of media literacy and civic engagement by "strengthening the capacity of individuals to participate as both producers and consumers in public conversations about events and issues that matter. Media and digital literacy education is now fundamentally implicated in the practice of citizenship" (p. 16).

Henry Jenkins' work in *participatory culture* provides a useful context for exploring many of the social and civic movements underfoot today, facilitated by connective technologies. Jenkins develops a participatory culture where citizens

engage in collaborative behavior, sharing, and co-creations of meaning because the barriers to these communities engaging have largely been diminished. Jenkins et al. (2009) see participatory spaces allowing “average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways” (p.8). The rise of self-organizing communities of interest is increasingly shifting the responsibility of media habits, information gathering, expression and sharing to that of the audience. In *ReWire*, Zuckerman (2013) notes the potential power this shift provides audiences:

We can build new tools that help us understand whose voices we’re hearing and whom we are ignoring. We can make it easier to understand conversations in other languages, and to collaborate with people in other nations. We can take steps towards engineering serendipity, collecting insights that are unexpected and helpful. With a fraction of the brainpower that’s gone into building the Internet as we know it, we can build a network that helps us discover, understand, and embrace a wider world. (p. 9)

The response Jenkins (2006b) advocates for is a space to “...foster the skills and cultural knowledge necessary to deploy those tools toward our own ends” (p. 8). These tools, growing in scope and diversity by the day, are now cemented as the platforms for information and communication needs in daily life. They are also where people find common bonds, share ideas and opinions, find humor, creativity, and a sense of value: where their ideas, rights and worldviews can join in organized and active fashion.

The sense of *value* is not found in the tools but rather in the sharing and points of shared interest that communities demonstrate. In *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins et al. (2013) note, “...while new tools have proliferated the means by which people can circulate material, word-of-mouth recommendations and the sharing of media content are impulses that have long driven how people interact with each other” (pp. 2-3). A host of examples show the value that communities find in the content they share with one another. In response to acts of violence or oppression, like the Boston Marathon Bombings, the brutality of regimes in Egypt, Libya and Syria, or in diffuse but passionate groups such as Occupy Wall Street, social tools have allowed for organization and sharing of vital resources. These allow for communities to organize physically and figuratively, to share important information, to collectively express visions, ideas, and points of view, and to find spaces for collective production and collaborative action that were once constrained by what Shirky (2008) puts forth as transaction costs: “Ridiculously easy group-forming matters because the desire to be part of a group that shares, cooperates, or acts in concert is a basic human instinct that has always been constrained by transaction costs” (p. 54).

Finding value in digital spaces is predicated on the ability to share with the community. This deceptively simple act depends on spreading information.

Exploring this process in more detail, Jenkins et al. (2013) understand the *spreadability* phenomenon as:

...the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of a media text that might appeal to a community's motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes. (p. 4)

These various factors outlined allow individuals to see ideas, content, and communication as part of a large, diverse exchange ecosystem of spreadability. Jenkins et al. (2013) highlight a host of emerging dynamics—the flow of ideas, dispersed material, diversified experiences, open-ended participation, facilitated sharing, localized networks, grassroots intermediaries and collaboration—that encompass the spreadability of information. The technological and connective social infrastructures are now available and the barriers to connectivity have dropped alongside the rise of mobile technologies. This new ecosystem for spreadable media is premised on the participation of engaged people, who find value in their shared commitments and are finding new ways to partake in the active spreadability of the ideas and causes to which they are committed.

MEDIATED IDENTITIES, MEDIATED COMMUNITIES, AND MEDIA LITERACY: TOWARDS A NEW PEDAGOGY FOR ENGAGEMENT IN DIGITAL CULTURE

Young people today are armed with a set of new collaborative tools, spaces and networks with which they can engage and share around their favorite television shows, sports teams, political viewpoints, and social causes. In this book, we will visit a host of case studies that take us around the world, exploring civic activism against oppressive regimes in the Middle East, economic and political unrest in Greece and Argentina, health advocacy in China, political distrust in Mexico, and rising civic voices in Kenya. Across these examples, again and again, we see a new ecosystem where young people are organizing around causes through social networks and digital technologies.

Beyond this connectivity however, is a certain media savvy that all groups need to operate effectively and skillfully in digital culture. This is predicated on having the skills and dispositions to be effective and engaged participants in daily civic life, whether in the face of large-scale oppression or in the context of everyday community needs. Media literacy education provides the foundations with which people can learn the individual and participatory competencies for engagement across the various networks and spaces they will inhabit. The specific competencies that individuals need to thrive online are still emerging, and will continue to evolve at the same fast pace as new technologies. Nevertheless,

exploring what those competencies are, and how young people apply them in their daily lives, can help us better understand the ecosystem for communication and engagement in digital culture today.

In my work over the last seven years at the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change², I have seen young people come together from around the world to build networks for media and social change in communities of wide and varied interests. As these young media innovators gather in Salzburg to build dynamic multimedia and educational content, they find their sense of identity and community buoyed by a need to be connected. This starts with their social surroundings but quickly extends into mediated spaces that they use to enrich their information and communication needs, as well as support their beliefs, values, and attitudes. Students understand media as conduits, or tools, with which they can affect change in a multitude of scenarios. To do so, they understand the importance of critical inquiry, but also of critical expression. These both tailor to social interactions in online and offline spaces.

The participants in Salzburg engage in a rigorous program where they learn the critical skills needed to navigate and artfully participate in online spaces. They question the value of digital spaces, and the distraction they often bring. They learn how to build effective advocacy campaigns online, cultivating community involvement, designing for directional engagement, and practicing healthy skepticism at all points in their media literacy experiences. The participants in Salzburg use media literacy as a civic tool. Whether the issue is about local infrastructure, educational policy, or about global sustainability, justice, and human rights, digital media competencies and fluencies are no longer an option for inclusive participation, activism and engagement.

In *ReWire*, Ethan Zuckerman (2013) questions the common view of the Internet as a hub for more global connectivity, and more cross-cultural and cross-national information flow. He offers troves of evidence that show how, despite the Internet's global reach, it does not automatically create a more vibrant, diverse and inclusive global public sphere. Zuckerman believes that it is up to us to build a new global and collaborative ecosystem: "The Internet will not magically turn us into digital cosmopolitans; if we want to maximize the benefits and minimize the harms of connection, we have to take responsibility for shaping the tools we use to encounter the world" (p. 40). What does taking responsibility look like? What skills and tools do we need to build the tools that grant more mindful cosmopolitans in digital culture?

We already see media savvy citizens activating, organizing and engaging in likeminded communities, facilitated by connective and collaborative information and communication platforms. Part Two of this book highlights some of these new movements, started and sustained by the communities themselves. The

competencies needed to effectively maintain these active spaces are less about the tools and more about the literacies needed to effectively critique, contribute and create directed engagement with networks of active, collaborative and dynamic citizens in digital culture. That's the role of media literacy today. If we can find ways, both formally and informally, to help instill these competencies in young people, we have a chance to harness our new collaborative spaces for more inclusive and active participation in communities large and small, local and global.

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NOTES

¹ Of course, we must acknowledge the new hegemonic power structures that exist in the context of these tools. The algorithms that control search engines, and social network feeds do dictate to a large extent the type of information we are exposed to.

² The Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change is an annual multidisciplinary summer program that brings together faculty and students from around the world to examine the role of media in identifying, framing and solving local and global problems, and how citizens can use media to affect and lead change. Since its founding in 2007, more than 400 students from North and South America, Africa, Asia and Europe have participated in a range of innovative pedagogical activities that seek to inspire them to become agents of civic action, to develop an identity as global citizens, and to actively participate in overcoming social, cultural and linguistic barriers.