

Media Literacy Education: the new Civic Currency

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Briefly, what is your media literacy philosophy and your approach?

When I began writing about media education and young citizens almost ten years ago, I had the pleasure of exploring a burgeoning discipline that was gaining steam in the context of a growing digital culture. Foundational research and field-defining texts (see Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs 1998; Hobbs 2007; Hobbs & Frost, 2003; Jenkins 2006) laid the foundation for the emergence of peer-reviewed academic journals devoted to the topic of media literacy, a host of doctoral dissertations in the area of media literacy, and new explorations that place media literacy in the context of participation (Jenkins et al 2009), play (Ito, 2009) and voice (Rheingold 2008; 2012).

Further, global organizations like UNESCO, the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, the European Union, and governmental bodies around the world have—including the world's young democracy, Bhutan—have started programs, non-profit organizations and initiatives centered on the need to educate citizens about the role of media in their daily lives. In the United States in the year, Massachusetts and New York have been pushing legislation through the state houses to advocate for media literacy as a core and acknowledged part of K-12 education.

What this vast growth shows me is that media literacy is not only being recognized as a pedagogical tool for youth learning critically think, explore and express, but moreover that media literacy education is directly tied to the effective functioning of publics in civic societies around the world. The recent uprisings in the MENA countries, Thailand,

the Ukraine, Greece, and beyond, show that the use of networks and connective technologies tools are helping to organize and facilitate a wave of impactful and far reaching civic movements in the face of oppression.

My approach to media literacy has been informed by this wave of civic expression. I have come to see media literacy education as inherently positioned at the core of engagement in daily life, from assisting and participating in local community dialog and sharing ideas and information with peers, to engaging in the civic causes. For media literacy to continue to grow as the central field for learning and engagement today, it must be seen as an inherent facilitator of participation and belonging in daily life.

Media literacy, to me, is the new civic currency.

What does your current work look like?

My current work supports the civic potential of media education by sitting at the nexus of media literacy, young people, and engagement in daily life. I'm interested in how young citizens—as they leave formal school—find points of individual agency through their information and communication habits, and social agency through the connective and participatory networks they are finding more and more space in for collaboration, dialog, interactivity, and voice.

My recent research has produced two books. *Media Literacy & the Emerging Citizen: Youth, Engagement and Participation in Digital Culture* (Peter Lang, 2014) is the culmination of three years of research into young people and engagement in digital culture. It breaks new ground in showing a disconnect between use and perception of social tools for information and communication needs, and recommends a series of competencies to engage youth through social and mobile platforms. *Media Literacy Education in Action* (co-edited with Belinha De Abreu, Routledge, 2014), provides a birds-eye view of the state of media literacy education from a pedagogical and theoretical perspective.

My work also explores the role new connective platforms in daily information and communication habits of young people. I am interested in the phenomenon of curation as a core media literacy competency for a connected generation, the role of the mobile phone in facilitating daily information and communication needs, and perceptions of civic agency within social media platforms.

Beyond research, for the last six years I have directed the *Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change*, a global incubator for innovation across borders, across cultures, and across divides. The Academy engages in collaborative research projects, digital literacy training, and hosts a summer institute that gathers 70 college students and a dozen faculty from around the world for one month in Salzburg, Austria, to explore and build networks for innovation and entrepreneurial media production in global contexts. More than 400 young media innovators have participated in our program and are now out in the media industry and classroom in over 50 countries around the world. The Academy has also produced a series of global media literacy case studies that have been downloaded in over 100 countries around the world.

At Emerson College, I'm a co-founder of *The Emerson Literacy Education and Empowerment Project (eLEEP)*, which launched in 2012 as a health and media literacy project in partnership with the Boston Public Health Commission. For the past two summers, we've brought 125 high school students from underserved Boston communities to Emerson over a 6-week period to learn how to critically analyze and create media to promote healthy lifestyles.

What changes do you see coming in media literacy or in your work?

As I look forward at the field of media literacy, I see enormous potential to build a scholarly and academic home for the field that is situated in the foundational civic functions of democratic society. Media education will have no choice but to respond to the role of mobile technologies and connective networks as vibrant spaces for engagement in daily life. As the boundaries between formal and informal spaces for learning continue to dissolve, media literacy will become about more than pedagogy: it will necessarily incorporate the silos that have long existed in traditional communication fields.

My work maintains a strategic focus on the intersection of media literacy, young people, and engagement in digital culture, positioning media literacy in the context of communication, citizenship, and informal learning. Increasingly, this work engages a more global perspective, as the boundaries for information and communication continue to disintegrate into the depths of the Web. My current large-scale research project is under the working title *Borderless Citizens: How a participatory generation is reshaping the Global Public Sphere*. This project will engage 400 young media makers around the world in a survey and interviews on the competencies needed to be engaged

and active innovators in today's digital culture. This project will explore and isolate the media literacy competencies that are most relevant to engagement in global culture.

What is your vision of what is needed to move the field of media literacy to the next level?

For media literacy to continue to coalesce as a core discipline for preparing future citizens for lives of inclusive and engaged participation, I advocate for the following four positions to be taken:

1. *Start Taking Sides* – In an increasingly ubiquitous media culture, media literacy can no longer be about critical thinking as an end goal. Critical thinking and critical expression, while central to the media literacy field, are not strong enough convictions to warrant the attention that media literacy needs in educational and policy arenas. Media literacy educators must start taking sides: directing critical thinking and expression towards goals, outcomes, and positions. Media literacy for health is about fighting against epidemics in obesity, heart disease, and other ailments that have plagued our time. The end goal must be to help reform issues in some way, shape or form. *Otherwise, media literacy will continue to teach about issues, without teaching for issues.* Media literacy analysis of political rhetoric about the environment, for example, should be directed at understanding sustainability, climate change, and the media's portrayal of these issues. While youth will come to their own conclusions, media literacy needs to position itself as the place where these decisions can be made, with confidence, humility, and tolerance.
2. *Build Research to Support the Field* – To be able to take a more activist approach to our work—namely that media literacy is an essential pedagogy for leadership and engagement today—we need more research to back our work up. Media literacy scholars have been very proficient in writing about approaches to teaching and learning with media, but we have kicked our tires a bit to coalesce as a research-driven field in support of media literacy education. The academic journals now growing offer a start for the field, but too often our research gets subsumed by larger disciplines. Recent studies (Hallaq, 2013; Hobbs et al, 2013; Mihailidis, 2014) provide research that can be used to show the value, or need, for media literacy. This needs to be a bigger part of our mission and culture.
3. *Connect Work To Policy* – This challenge may be the most difficult to engage with directly, but it's already started. Media education organizations and activists are proposing legislation to bring media literacy into schools in the United States, the EU is working to produce research and curriculum for it's members, and in the Middle East, media education is beginning to sprout up in Beirut, Amman and beyond. Media literacy advocates need to begin seeing their work as applied to help reform in formal and informal policy spaces.

4. *Make our mission [even more] known* – Lastly, media literacy education needs to use its rich history to find its future voice. Media literacy education is well beyond needing to be justified anymore. As the term becomes more familiar, the media literacy community needs to have the scholarship, inquiry, and message ready. I’m less convinced this can happen if the community continues to rehash old divides, argue over best approaches, and think on a small scale.

To think about media literacy as a “4.0” concept, I return to the early roots of the field in the United States. The 1998 seminar *Journal of Communication* issue devoted to media literacy covers much of the same content we see today: expressing the ever pressing need to prepare young people for lives of inclusiveness and active engagement in daily life. Over the past two decades, what has changed is the increasing dependence on mediated platforms to facilitate daily information and communication needs, and general knowledge, understanding and engagement with our communities, and world. Within this diverse space media literacy has the potential to be the new civic currency for a digital generation. The opportunity has always been there, it’s time we took sides and took a stance.

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