THE MOBILE CITIZEN
Exploring constructs for media education in the Global Public Sphere

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The Emerging Mobile Civic Landscape

Across the globe today, the emergence of readily available connective technologies have resulted in the documenting and sharing of daily life in communities of all shapes and sizes. With more mobile phones than humans on the planet, and rapidly rising Internet connectivity throughout the world, mediated platforms have fast become central prerequisites for connecting individuals, communities and societies. Van Dijck (2013) notes the implications of such a rapid convergence of communication technologies:

> As a result of the interconnection of platforms, a new infrastructure
>
> emerged: an ecosystem of connective media with a few large and many
>
> small players. The transformation from networked communication to
>
> "platformed" sociality, and from a participatory culture to a culture of
>
> connectivity, took place in a relatively short time span of ten years (p. 5).

What Van Dijck sees as an emerging "culture of connectivity" has led to the rapid growth of personal expression, sharing, and repurposing of information in peer-to-peer spaces.

The active restructuring of forms of engagement and participation in daily life are part of what Castells (2010) understands as the "rise of the networked society" where, "In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning" (p.3).

The modes of social meaning inherent in these new information landscapes are central to understanding the diversity of motivations driving people to engage in the information sharing process in large-scale connective networks. Sharing information to few and many has become a dominant source of meaning making, (Castells, 2012) especially for young people who are growing up in ever-increasing mediated realities (Castells et al., 2006; Mihailidis 2014). One implication of this public culture of sharing and expression is what Shumow (2014) sees as "formless collective identities" that "often operate without physical dimensions and lack clear connections to both space and place" (p. 6).

Connective networks have often been seen as most vibrant in the context of responsive engagement to large scale political, economic and civic oppression—like the Arab Uprisings, the conflict in the Ukraine, and Occupy Wall Street (Garret, 2006; Mercea, 2013; Siegel, 2009; Earl et al., 2013; Thorson et al., 2013; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). At the same time, such networks have the power to connect communities in the context of addressing everyday problems and challenges that are part of daily life. We have seen such active engagement by recent connective awareness movements for gay rights (HRC), health awareness (ALS Ice Bucket), and civic voices (Carrot Mobs, Citizeninvestor, GoFundMe). Such engagement is facilitated by connective networks, but

not motivated because of them. While motivations for engaging are grounded in disputing ideas of personal aggrandizement, egocentrism, and social capital, what we do see clearly is increasing engagement by citizens in connective networks to engage in personal and public issues.

This increase has been largely enabled by the rapid growth of mobile technologies—most specifically mobile "smart" phones—in the daily lives of young people. Recent scholarship has advocated for capitalizing on the potential that mobile technologies play in the formation of digital literacies for an increasingly mobile generation (Ashley et, al. 2012; Squire, 2009). This potential has been rooted in avenues of communication, collaboration, and engagement in personal and public communication (McNair, 2009; Papacharissi, 2009), which are embedded in notions of mobility, places, and connective capacities, and in notions of inclusion that "undergird social participation and buttress our sense of belonging to something that transcends the self and the clan," (Lasica, 1). The capacity of mobile technologies, as convergent devices offering an ecosystem of connectivity, sociality, and spreadability, calls into play their role in the facilitation of dynamic collaboration, inclusion in civic life, and the ability to coordinate and engage in new forms of civic practice, design, and participation.

This chapter will focus on the role of digital media education in facilitating the use of mobile technologies as connective platforms for engagement in daily life and more robust information and communication habits across borders and across cultures. The goal of this work will be to help position the critical constructs, competencies and prototypes that can harness the potential for mobile technologies and connective platforms to engage with global issues to develop a sense of active engagement in daily

civic life. These collectively can help position digital media literacy education as a core competency for engagement in ubiquitous 21st century mobile culture.

How Media Literacy approaches Mobile Technologies

In the Introduction to *Mediated Communities: Civic Voices, Empowerment and Media Literacy in the Digital Era*, Shumow (2014) notes that "if we are going to endow power and agency to the communities and citizens that Shirky (2010) has referred to as the former audience, then we must also think about the tools they will need to survive and thrive in these new environments" (p.8). Increasingly, the tools that Shumow acknowledges are not simply devices, apps, or platforms, but also the critical skills, dispositions and constructs that are embedded in the use, design and practice of digital technologies. As I wrote in Shumow's collection, this becomes 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" (Mihailidis, 2014, 16).

The evolution of media literacy education as an ecosystem that supports an active and embedded approach to mobility is rooted in a development of the field over the last three or more decades. Foundational work in the media education field largely responded to a growing ubiquity of media in daily life, while at the same time, seeing a need to make distinct the notion of teaching about and with media. Scholarship in media literacy has grown since to incorporate dispositions in media effects, cultural studies, citizenship studies, pedagogies, and technology, all of which are related to how people learn about media's role in daily life, and society.

More recently, media education has responded to the convergence of media platforms, the rapid evolution in social and connective technologies, and the ubiquitous presence of mobile devices around the world. At the same time, formal education systems have been hampered by a seemingly impossible mandate to keep up with the pace of technological evolution, something they have not done and will likely never be able to do (Rheingold 2012). As a result, schools continue to chase technologies, and implement systems that quickly become dated. Media education, at the same time, has expanded its reach and breadth to incorporate educational technologies alongside movements in connected learning (Ito et al., 2012), new literacies (Coiro et al., 2008; Lankshear and Knobel, 2006), critical media literacy (Alvermann and Hagood, 2000; Kellner & Share, 2005), and digital citizenship (Hobbs, 2010; Gallagher, 2013). These areas of study have at their core the willingness to understand the situated place of the learner/actor in mediated societies. They discuss a range of modalities and dispositions that are necessary to equip young people with the tools they need to effectively and inclusively engage in digital culture.

The growth of mobile technologies and their now-central place in the daily lives of young people (Bertel, 2013) is increasingly the focus of dialog about how best to prepare future generations for inclusive civic participation. Studies have shown that mobile technologies engage young people in more dynamic consumption, sharing, expression and participation with information and communication needs (Istvan, 2011; Parry, 2011), and that increased familiarity with mobile technologies can garner a greater sense of agency with mobile technologies for more than personal or social reasons (Squire & Dikkers, 2008).

These works situate mobile technologies in different contexts and with different points of emphasis and skepticism. They embrace the access to technologies that students now see as a default part of their situated identities and experiences in daily life. I want to build from these conceptual works to highlight two specific constructs—connectivity and spreadability—that digital media education must support in the context of ubiquitous mobile adoption in daily life around the world.

Connectivity

In the context of ubiquitous mobile culture, media literacy's emphasis on *critical thinking* about media texts becomes only one part of a larger system of competencies and constructs. Media education scholars have situated the mode of critical inquiry in cultural (Buckingham, 2003), technological (Rushkoff 2013), pedagogical (Hobbs, 1998; 2010) and effects (Postman, 1985) traditions, but these have been positioned within the frame of a relationship to and with texts. In a ubiquitous mobile culture, there is an emphasis in understanding the context of connectivity from a textual perspective but also a larger systems perspective. In her recent book, *The Culture of Connectivity*, Van Dijck (2013) highlights the mutually constitutive relationship that users "negotiate" with technological platforms to facilitate information and communication in their daily lives (p. 6).

These "platforms of connectivity," Van Dijck argues, are shifting the dialog about users embedded in a "participatory culture" (Jenkins 2006), to a connective culture where, "sociality coded by technology renders people's activities formal, manageable, and manipulable, enabling platforms to engineer the sociality in people's everyday routines" (p. 13). In this connective culture, digital media literacy becomes not only about

critical inquiry, expression and dialog, but also about systems, modalities, and designed sociality, where "the choice for a "like" button betrays an ideological predilection: it favors instant, gut-fired, emotional, positive evaluations. Popularity not only becomes quantifiable but also manipulable: boosting popularity rankings is an important mechanism built into these buttons" (Van Dijck, 13).

Connective culture is further embedded in what Turkle (2008) refers to as a "tethered" generation who use technology as an act of self-establishment, where young people facilitate a sense of self-worth through consistently reaffirming their sense of popularity, place, and belonging online. Nicholas Carr, in *The Shallows* (2009), supports the notion of tethering when he writes, "teens and other young adults have a terrific interest in knowing what's going on in the lives of their peers, couple with a terrific anxiety about being out of the loop…if they stop sending messages, they risk being invisible" (p.118). Carr asserts that youth trade off their concentration, attention and focus for a wealth of information that is diverting, short lived, and socially compelling. This shift signifies a need to be consistently visible (Goggin, 2009), which, in turn has been linked to the growing attachment to mobile technologies (Wei & Lo, 2006; Goh et al. 2009).

The emerging connective culture that has been perpetuated by mobile technologies brings great opportunity and challenge to how we prepare young people for lives of inclusive and active engagement in daily life. The work of Jenkins et al (2009) provides an attempt to situate a new framework for media literacies that are inclusive of digital realities today. Anchored by participation and engagement, the set of skills, from play, performance and appropriation, to multitasking, judgment and networking, help

facilitate a set of skills for educators to focus on in the context of convergence. Nevertheless, how such literacies are activated in the context of a connected, global culture, will dictate their value to media literacy education as it evolves in a digital context.

Spreadability

Alongside the phenomenon of connective culture is the inherent use of new mobile tools and platforms to "spread" information. Not only do social networks and platforms allow individuals to participate and connect in new and dynamic ways, mobile technologies are also designed to facilitate the spread of information, which is partly the glue that connects communities of interest across the world. As a result, spreadable content has theoretically equalized the potential reach of content from citizens compared to traditional media institutions. In their book *Spreadable Media,* Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) understand the concept of spreadability 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). The landscape that has emerged is one where citizens "count on each other to pass along compelling bits of news, information, and entertainment, often many times over the course of a given day" (Jenkins, Ford & Green, p. 13).

What affordances does a spreadable culture allow for digital media literacy? First, it places an emphasis on the role of the public thinker, who creates and shares content with an audience in mind. Clive Thompson, in *Smarter Than You Think* (2013), argues

that this mode of thought creates stronger content and a heightened sense of responsibility by authors. Second, the sheer amount of writing and publishing has increased exponential in a spreadable environment. If we look at large scale global events, like Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Uprisings, or the most recent umbrella protests in Hong Kong, they all began in local contexts, and quickly scaled to national and global levels. This is largely facilitated first by the spread of information from diverse online communities. Third, with the borders of information disintegrating, there is an opportunity, or responsibility to cultivate what Ethan Zuckerman (2013) understands as a sense of "digital cosmopolitanism" in which he states, "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). This sense of cosmopolitanism is a call for a citizenry that is not only skilled in critical engagement with media texts, but also with the capability to extend their online engagement into spaces that transcend cultures, and borders.

Media education embraces spreadable media at the point of what Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) see as a re-engagement with the core human value of storytelling: "Perhaps nothing is more human than sharing stories, whether by fire or by "cloud" (so to speak). We must all be careful not to suppose that a more participatory means of circulation can be explained solely (or even primarily) by this rise of technological infrastructure..." (p. 3). Individuals, and not technologies, are at the heart of this spreadable culture. It is how they perceive their expression and contribution that will dictate the value of these spaces for expression, sharing, collaboration and participation in

global culture. The task of preparing individuals for such information and communication infrastructures is at the heart of digital media education in mobile culture.

The mobile citizen: Towards a media literate ecosystem for engagement in the global culture

The concepts of connectivity and spreadability are meant to set a constructive context for approaching digital media education as a mechanism to move beyond the primary focus on texts, to a more situated space for practices, modalities, and critical competencies that facilitate the inclusive engagement and participation in global civic life. These constructs are not new, nor are they foreign to the media education field. Rather, to prepare future generations for lives of engagement and civic good, digital media literacy education must extrapolate from a focus on the individual situated in media texts, and towards the actor embedded in a mediated ecosystem of civic life. Only then will the affordances of technologies be understood in more holistic and purposeful ways for daily life, and not reserved for civic dialog in response to oppression, injustice, or marginalization.

Educators, parents, policy makers and community stakeholders must embrace the connective and spreadable nature of mobile technologies to better harness their potential. This necessarily involves critical media literacy skills of analysis, evaluation, and comprehension and creation, but also those of design, participation, remix, cultural appropriation, engagement in diversity, listening, and cross cultural exploration. An array of skills and critical constructs that engage at their core with the concepts laid out in this

chapter.

This chapter sets some theoretical boundaries for understanding the role of connective and spreadable technologies as they approach media education. Its intention is to provide a baseline for discussion of how media education transcends boundaries, cultures, and divides in both formal and informal education settings. With a more expansive and inclusive global approach to media education, the field may embrace more integrated and viable approaches to participation in digital culture. This will rely on a willingness to engage and embrace the platforms, spaces, and technologies that are increasingly facilitated cross-cultural dialog, engagement, and activity in the global public sphere. As Rheingold notes at the onset of *Net Smart* (2012)*:* "The future of digital culture—yours, mine, ours—depends on how well we learn to use the media that have infiltrated, amplified, distracted, enriched, and complicated our lives" (1).

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