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Media Literacy as a Core Competency for Engaged Citizenship in Participatory Democracy

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Abstract

The ubiquitous media landscape today is reshaping what it means to be an engaged citizen. Normative metrics for engagement—voting, attending town meetings, participation in civic groups—are eroding in the context of online advocacy, social protest, "liking," sharing, and remixing. These new avenues for engagement offer vast opportunities for new and innovative approaches to teaching and learning about political engagement in the context of new media platforms and technologies. This article explores digital media literacy as a core competency for engaged citizenship in participatory democracy. It combines new models of engaged and citizenship and participatory politics with frameworks for digital and media literacy education, to develop a framework for media literacy as a core political competency for active, engaged, and participatory citizenship.

Keywords

media literacy, civic engagement, participatory culture, digital education

The Emerging Citizen

Present-day discussions on the tenets of citizenship cannot avoid including the role of media in civic participation and engagement. For the past decade, scholars have lamented the loss of traditional indicators for civic engagement, including attending town hall meetings, participating in civic groups, and voting in local elections (Gordon, 2013; Putnam, 2000; Wattenberg, 2007). While these measures still have a place in the framework for "good citizenship," they are increasingly distant from the reality of

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what participation looks like for societies increasingly linked by media technologies. This issue of what constitutes "good citizenship" is not unique to the digital age—in Langton and Jennings's landmark 1968 study of civic education of American youth, they acknowledge the difficulty of defining and evaluating a term in such flux, writing "the 'good citizen' is something of an ideal type whose attitudes and behavior vary with the values of those defining the construct" (p. 852).

Nevertheless, the ubiquitous media landscape today is providing numerous new avenues for engaged and active civic participation. On a large scale, the evolution of "networked social movements" (Castells, 2012), organized largely around digital tools and social media platforms, is reshaping civic engagement not only in the case of large-scale civic and political uprisings, but also in the context of daily engagement with personal and public matters. Allan (2012) notes that "efforts to rethink civic engagement, I would suggest, need to better understand how personal experience gives shape to the ways young people relate to their communities beyond 'citizenship' narrowly defined" (p. 36).

Indeed, this rethinking of civic engagement has engendered a rich and active debate on civic and political engagement in digital societies. Scholars have extolled the new possibilities that social technologies have provided for increased cooperative production (Benkler, 2006; Lessig, 2008), for online crowd-sourced civic activities (Howe, 2008; Surwowiecki, 2005), and for the increased value provided in peer-to-peer collaborative models where "the people formerly known as the audience . . . create value for one another every day" (Shirky, 2010, p. 17). Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robinson (2009) note the need to foster the requisite skills and knowledge needed for a participatory age: "Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (p. 8).

At the same time, pressing complexities in the digital mediasphere along the lines of "communication-effects gaps" (Coleman & Price, 2012, p. 38) and "participation gaps" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 257) have brought into question to what extent social media technologies create avenues for valuable civic engagement and social impact (Dean, 2005; Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2010). Even less work has been devoted to exploring the formal and informal pedagogies needed to help prepare future citizens for lives of inclusive and participatory politics (see Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee, & Philippi, 2008; Bennett, Wells, & Rank, 2009; Thevenin, 2012).

Nevertheless, increasing attention has been given to measures for assessing civic engagement in the Internet age (Bennett, 2008; Buckingham, 2000; Kahne, Lee, & Feezell, 2012; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Dell Carpini, 2006). Scholars have explored the increasing political capacity fostered by Internet technologies (Lasica, 2008; Rheingold, 2008a, 2008b) and the connectedness that can emerge in online communities (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2010; Fowler & Christakis, 2010; Haythornthwaite, 2005; Romer, Hall Jamieson, & Pasek, 2009; Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009),

Dalton (2009) develops a framework of a "good citizen" predicated on a series of social shifts—generational, living standards, education, work experience, gender

roles, and social diversity—that collectively reframe traditional conceptions of civic participation from "citizen duty (citizens vote, pay taxes, obey the law) to engaged citizenship (independent, assertive citizens concerned with others)" (p. 4). Loader (2007, p. 116), like Dalton, argues that young citizens are embracing a form of engaged citizenship through actions such as flash mobbing, citizen reporter blogging, online petitions, online charities, and so on.

Bennett (2008) offers his own dichotomy on present-day formulations of citizenship, differentiating the *actualizing citizen*—a loosely networked individual who reflects civic ideas through a personal lens—from the *dutiful citizen*—one still adhering to the traditional notions of civic engagement. Bennett asks whether private and public entities are "willing to allow young citizens to more fully explore, experience, and expand democracy, or will they continue to force them to try to fit into an earlier model that is ill suited to the networked societies of the digital age?" (p. 8). Bennett and Wells (2009) see the tension between old and new formulations of civic engagement as a direct result of digital influences that are changing citizen ideals:

> Because shifting ideals of citizenship are in play, we can better understand why some scholars seem to be anchoring their understanding of engagement in a clear but fading set of standards while others are peering into a future configuration that remains ill-defined. (p. 7)

Peter Dahlgren (2012) develops a "cautious optimism for young citizens, digital media and participation" around a core of what he calls "six dimensions of mutual reciprocity" (p. 19)—knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices, and identities—that together form a fluid but structured framework for understanding the changing realities for youth and participation in the context of their digital habits. Dahlgren's call to expand how we conceptualize civic culture in light of digital media's extensive penetration into all facets of society implores an investigation into the implications of new media technologies on how citizens understand what it means to be *engaged*.

Last, Gordon (2013) develops a notion of the civic web, in which he urges readers to think "beyond participation, or the efficient citizen transactions that take place on most municipal websites, like pay taxes and parking tickets, and moving towards engagement, or creating or harnessing platforms for collaboration, learning, and social connection." Gordon offers six principles—*tools solve problems, audience matters, networks are composed of people, scale matters, the civic web is on- and offline*, and *design for distraction*—that collectively guide the planning and implementation of new civic tools to foster engagement via the web.

Gordon's civic web, and the notions of "new" civic engagement that precede it, are all bound by a collective aim to build core competencies for future generations to harness the digital spaces and tools for civic information and communication needs. This aim calls specific attention to developing critical media literacy education models to help develop formal and informal civic competencies for youth across all facets of daily life.

Media Literacy's Role in Engaged Citizenship

In 1985, long before any Twitter revolution, the advent of social media, and even the consumer Internet, media scholar Len Masterman wrote,

> Media education is an essential step in the long march towards a truly participatory democracy, and the democratization of our institutions. Widespread media literacy is essential if all citizens are to wield power, make rational decisions, become effective change-agents, and have an effective involvement with the media. (p. 13)

While much has changed in the past two decades, this argument remains just as (and arguably more) valid as when Masterman wrote it. And while perspectives on media literacy vary widely, there is a growing consensus among scholars and educators that media education is a promising means of "develop[ing] informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society" (National Association of Media Literacy Education, 2007). The following argument develops three critical media literacy outcomes—*critical thinkers, creators and communicators*, and *agents of social change*—that position media literacy as developing core competencies for engaged citizenship in a participatory democracy.

Media Literate Citizens as Critical Thinkers

Despite the differences in the previously cited conceptualizations of engaged citizenship, each perspective necessitates that citizens act as *critical thinkers*. In an age of increased reliance on digital and social media across all age groups for information and communication needs (Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2012), citizens must be able to critically access and analyze a constant and diverse stream of information on which to base their democratic participation. Traditionally, media education has emphasized the analysis of media texts—introducing students to issues of representation, authorial intent, aesthetic presentation, and so on (Considine & Haley, 1999; Potter, 1998; Silverblatt, 2001). However, as the interpenetration of media consumption and democratic participation has become increasingly apparent over the past decade or more, scholars and educators have begun to discuss media literacy as the ability not just to read texts but also to situate them in relation to broader social, cultural, and political contexts. For example, in Renee Hobbs's (1998) "Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement," she emphasizes that

> media literacy, because it emphasizes a critique of textual authority, invites students to identify the cultural codes that structure an author's work, understand how these codes function as part of a social system, and disrupt the text through alternative interpretations. (p. 22)

In learning to critically read media messages, citizens are developing the abilities to gather accurate, relevant information about their society *and* to question authority (both textual and, by implication, institutional).

This is especially important considering the critical pedagogical traditions from which much of media literacy education stems. This discussion of citizens as critical thinkers deliberately recalls Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of *conscientizacao*—or "critical consciousness"—in which individuals develop the ability to perceive their social reality "not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (p. 49). Civic media literacy education, then, prepares citizens for democratic participation by helping them analyze mediated *representations of* their communities, as well as address *issues within* their communities. Citizens who actively practice this critical inquiry will learn to deconstruct media texts, but perhaps more important, they will be engaged in "deconstructing injustices, expressing their own voices, and struggling to create a better society" (Kellner & Share, 2007, pp. 19-20).

Media Literate Citizens as Effective Creators and Communicators

These proposed definitions of "good citizenship" also rely on individuals' ability to act as effective *creators* and *communicators*. Descriptions of today's citizen as *actualizing* and *engaged* imply a type of civic participation that goes beyond affiliating with a political party or casting a vote on Election Day. Rather, a truly participatory democracy relies on citizens' efforts to develop and share their unique perspectives on societal issues, as well as developing new approaches to creating and circulating these perspectives. Examples of how digital media have been utilized in such efforts are endless—from Invisible Children's Kony 2012 online campaign to the popularity of Shepard Fairey's Obama image in the 2008 election to the use of social media in the It Gets Better Project.

But this link between political participation and media participation is not limited to the appropriation of social media for campaigning or advocacy efforts. It is worth noting that this emerging definition of *engaged citizen* bears some resemblance to the concept of the *active audience* forwarded by scholars of media and culture in the mid- to late 20th century (see Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1976; Hall, 1980; Hall & Whannel, 1964; Hoggart, 1959). Rather than understanding media audiences as passive consumers, this approach understands television viewers, filmgoers, book readers, and so on as cocreators of meaning who always reinterpret and often remix media texts and share these creations with communities. Studies of, for example, the practices of fan communities have particular relevance to our interest in engaged citizenship when we consider the increasing conflation of popular cultural practices and political participation. Today, supporting a candidate or cause may mean writing a check or hitting the street, but it certainly involves viewing (and "liking") the online video. Jenkins (2006) suggests that increased attention to this convergence of consumption and citizenship, especially in the classroom, can be the means of preparing new generations for engaged citizenship and even revitalizing our political system. He writes,

> [W]e may also want to look at the structures of fan communities as showing us new ways of thinking about citizenship and collaboration. The political effects of these fan communities

> come not simply through the production and circulation of new ideas (the critical reading of favorite texts) but also through access to new social structures (collective intelligence) and new models of cultural participation (participatory culture). (p. 246)

This budding relationship between media creation and communication and political participation is admittedly tenuous. Jenkins follows the previous quote by asking, "Am I granting too much power here to these consumption communities? Perhaps" (pp. 246-247). In this context, media literacy education provides an opportunity for citizens to better recognize and ultimately embrace the productive possibilities of this convergence, and express their enthusiastic support of not just Harry Potter but maybe also Harry Reid, through the creation and communication of alternative media.

Media Literate Citizens as Agents of Social Change

Last, citizens must be able to gather and analyze information, develop informed opinions, and share these perspectives with others. These efforts stand to make significant contributions to civic life—the organization of political movements, the creation of new political practices and processes, and the institution of new legislative policies—when citizens see themselves as agents of social change. After all, Max Horkheimer (1937), father of critical studies of media and culture (and arguably the godfather to critical media literacy education), described the critical theory of the Frankfurt school as "not simply the theory of emancipation; it is the practice of it as well" (p. 233).

While the role of "political or social change objectives" in media education has historically been a site of struggle within the media literacy community (see Hobbs, 1998; Lewis & Jhally, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005), scholars and practitioners of all stripes are beginning to recognize the promise of "reposition[ing] media literacy as the core of new civic education" (Mihailidis, 2009, p. 9). For example, the media literacy community's commitment to democratic education and critical pedagogy encourages the creation of classroom cultures and teacher–student relations that prepare students for self-directed learning. Traditional, hierarchical relations between teacher and students are avoided to facilitate sites of colearning. Students are encouraged to collaborate with one another to identify challenges facing their communities, research these issues through critical analysis of media and other sources of evidence, and cooperate on creating and circulating alternative media that raise awareness about these issues and prompt political action. Hobbs (2010) writes,

> When people have digital and media literacy competencies, they recognize personal, corporate and political agendas and are empowered to speak out on behalf of the missing voices and omitted perspectives in our communities. By identifying and attempting to solve problems, people use their powerful voices and their rights under law to improve the world around them. (p. 17)

In media literacy classrooms, students not only are encouraged to examine media and society and their roles as consumers and citizens, but also practice critique and collaboration in preparation for becoming political agents in a participatory democracy.

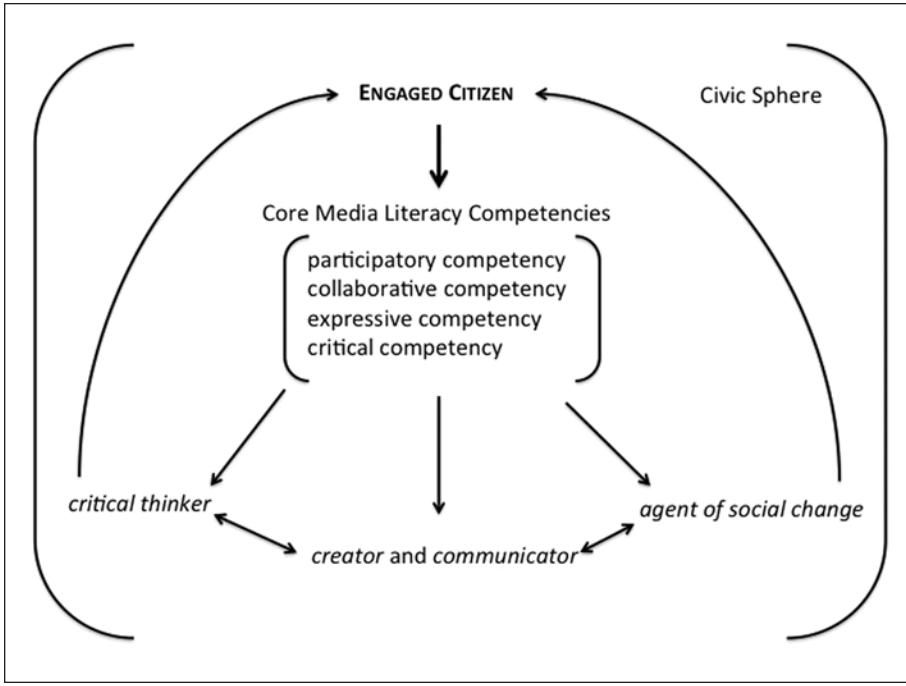

Figure 1. A framework for media literacy as a core competency for engaged citizenship.

"Communication alone can create the Great Community," wrote John Dewey (1927/1954, p. 142). Today, we are still awaiting the arrival of the society of which Dewey dreamed, but for that dream to be realized, the public must recognize its role in this end, and the potential for our critical, creative use of digital media to achieve it.

Toward a Media Literacy Framework for Engaged Citizenship

The path toward a vibrant participatory democracy is now dependent on engagement with media to facilitate participation in civic life. It is within this context that this article isolates media literacy as the core movement to develop inclusive, active, and engaged civic lifestyles. In today's hypermedia age, the engaged citizen must be made to understand the relationship between personal and social identity, and media as a sense of place, community, and democracy. This necessarily includes both strong critical and analytic approaches to media literacy, but also core understanding of media literacy as a collaborative and participatory movement that aims to empower individuals to have a voice and to use it.

The model presented in Figure 1 approaches a framework for the cyclical transfer of media literacy competencies to activate the three core dispositions for the engaged

citizen. The model is centered around four core medial literacy competencies for a participatory age. The first is a *participatory competency*, which focuses on enabling skills "make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 8). In the development of participatory skills, a strong connection is made between daily actions online and the contributions they stand to make to our networked spaces. As such skills are developed in young citizens, a culture of participation as default action online can emerge, and alongside it the notions of responsible, aware, and purposeful contributions to our local, national, and global communities.

A *collaborative competency* for the engaged citizen builds on Jenkins's participatory culture to outline how "generative learning communities" (Lewis, Pea, & Rosen, 2010, p. 352) can lead to a cocreation of meaning that moves toward engagement. Collaborative competencies extend both *bonding* and *bridging* social capital (Putnam, 2000) to help situate the engaged citizen in environments where they recognize the capacity they have to form connections and extend their communications to a large group of interested peers. Collaborative competencies also lower the barriers for peers to join the dialog or collaborate on a common cause (Shirky, 2008).

Whereas participatory and collaborative media literacy competences are centered on macro-level engagement, *expressive media literacy competencies* focus on the content that young citizens are posting and sharing. When students post status updates, share links, comment on things they see, or remix content from peers, they are engaging in the formation of a shared narrative. What they choose to share, where they choose to share, and how they express collectively build the dynamic peer-to-peer public sphere for knowledge creation and information dissemination. By focusing on the creation, dissemination, and reception of individual expression, young citizens can reflect on the content of their voice, and also on the power they have to be part of a larger civic dialog.

Last, *critical competency* grounds the media literacy experience in the core principles of access, evaluation, and analysis (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993; Livingstone, 2004). Across all media literacy scholarship is the grounded focus on individuals being able to critically view and engage with the media messages that they encounter on a daily basis. This critically inquiry involves their individual agency as consumers of messages, but also extends to an ecological agency, where their critical consumption of content also helps define and orient a sense of place and cultural connection to the world (Lopez, 2008).

This framework as a whole attempts to reposition media literacy as a core pedagogical framework for the emerging citizen in digital and participatory democracy. To prepare citizens for engaged, inclusive, and participatory lifestyles, necessarily includes their ability to navigate the digital landscapes that offer them space for expression, participation, collaboration, and engagement in civic life. This framework, while largely dependent on schools, homes, and policies that can implement more direct guidelines for media literacy, hopes to restart the discussion on media literacy as a movement with direct political and civic orientations.

While there may be no single metric or normative position for a "good citizen," it seems that in an increasingly mediated world, citizens with the capacities to

participate, collaborate, and express online stand a better chance to become *critical thinkers, creators and communicators*, and *agents of social change*: helping to empower civic voices for the future of sustainable, tolerant, and participatory democracy in the digital age.

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