

Spreadable Spectacle in Digital Culture: Civic Expression, Fake News, and the Role of Media Literacies in “Post-Fact” Society

American Behavioral Scientist
2017, Vol. 61(4) 441–454
© 2017 SAGE Publications
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0002764217701217
journals.sagepub.com/home/abs



Paul Mihailidis¹ and Samantha Viotty¹

Abstract

This article explores the phenomenon of spectacle in the lead up and immediate aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Through the spread of misinformation, the appropriation of cultural iconography, and the willing engagement of mainstream media to perpetuate partisan and polarizing information, the proliferation of populist rhetoric, polarizing views, and vitriolic opinions spread. Revisiting the world of critical theorist Guy Debord, this article argues that the proliferation of citizen-drive spectacle is unique in its origination and perpetuation, and a direct result of an increasingly polarized and distrustful public spending an increasing amount of time in homophilous networks where contrarian views are few and far between. We apply the frame of *spreadable media* to explore how citizen expression online initiated, sustained, and expanded the media spectacle that pervaded the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The conclusion of this work argues that media literacies, as a popular response mechanism to help cultivate more critical consumers of media, must be repositioned to respond to an era of partisanship and distrust. We present a set of considerations for repositioning the literacies to focus on critique and creation of media in support of a common good, and that can respond meaningfully in an era of spreadability, connectivity, and spectacle.

Keywords

civic engagement, fake news, media literacy, memes, social media, alternative media

¹Emerson College, Boston, MA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Paul Mihailidis, Emerson College, 120 Boylston Street, Boston, MA 02116-4624, USA.
Email: pmihailidis@gmail.com

Introduction: Media Spectacle and Digital Culture

The proliferation of partisan reporting by news organizations, polarizing rhetoric by cable media outlets, and vitriolic opinions voiced by citizens online reached a tipping point this past fall as a contentious and polarizing U.S. presidential election neared voting day. News organizations continued their pursuit of information that could elaborate on what is now generally regarded as one of the most polarizing presidential election in U.S. history. The coverage was divisive to the extent that experts and pundits blamed the loss of viewership for many other popular products, specifically the National Football League, on the election. Presidential debates garnered a record number of viewers, and interest did not wane, as it normally does, from the first to third debate (Littleton & Schwindt, 2016). While much of the coverage attempted to follow issues, it quickly emerged that coverage including republican presidential nominee Donald Trump garnered far more reach than reporting that focused on issues, or democratic nominee Hillary Clinton.

The ubiquitous coverage of the campaign evokes the work of critical theorist, Guy Debord on the phenomenon of *spectacle*. "Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation," wrote Debord in 1967, arguing that mediated relationships erode lived identity, replacing it with "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 1967, p. 8). In the lead up to the 2016 presidential campaign, media spectacle evoked what Debord argued was a reuniting of the separate, and maintenance of isolation through representations of identity, rather than identity itself.

Contemporary cultural studies and critical media scholar Douglas Kellner (2009, p. 1) builds on Debord's work to consider the emergence of spectacle in contemporary media culture:

By spectacle, I mean media constructs that are out of the ordinary and habitual daily routine which become special media spectacles. They involve an aesthetic dimension and often are dramatic, bound up with competition like the Olympics or Oscars. They are highly public social events, often taking a ritualistic form to celebrate society's highest values. Yet while media rituals function to legitimate a society's "sacred center" (Shils) and dominant values and beliefs (Hepp and Couldry 2009), media spectacles are increasingly commercialized, vulgar, glitzy, and, I will argue, important arenas of political contestation.

Kellner's interpretation of media spectacle focuses on the intentional construction of "media events" (Dayan & Katz, 1992) that reinforce and are reinforced by the dominant media, social, and political structures that anchor contemporary democratic society (Kellner, 2005). Spectacles in the mass media space produce events that can be constructed, altered, and shifted for purposes of maintaining, reifying, or destabilizing spectacles. In the Internet age, media spectacle, "by contrast, are more diffuse, variable, unpredictable, and contestable" (Kellner, 2009). One key quality of media spectacle in digital culture is the extent to which online communities of like-minded citizens can create, extend, and sustain spectacle with little support from mainstream media.

In this article, we explore the phenomenon of spectacle in an ubiquitous digital media culture. We apply the frame of "spreadable media" to explore how citizen expression

online initiated, sustained, and expanded the media spectacle that pervaded the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Spreadable media, articulated in a book by the same name written by Henry Jenkins, Joshua Green, and Sam Ford (2013), “refers to the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes, sometimes with the permission of rights holders, sometimes against their wishes” (p. 3). Spreadability offers an intriguing backdrop for revisiting Debord’s work on spectacle. It allows us to explore the ideological construction of spectacle that separates the consumer from reality through the conscious actions that citizens make to spread spectacle outside the framework of mainstream media and unhindered by the “lie” of reality.

To ground this argument, this article employs the case of fake news in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the appropriation of political dialog through memes, specifically the Pepe the Frog meme that was appropriated by the “alt-right” movement. These cases will help elaborate on the following questions: How is spectacle perpetuated and sustained by spreadable media? How does appropriation of content affect civic expression and dialog online? What is the role of mainstream news and media outlets in legitimating the existence and spreading of spectacle? We will use these questions to articulate the emergence of spreadable spectacle, and to critique normative media literacy models that have been increasingly seen as “solutions” to the proliferation of fake news, misinformation, and rumor online. While we believe that media literacies are indeed necessary means for combating the uncritical reading of texts and the use of polarizing dialog online to advance extremist and hateful narratives, in this article, we argue that current normative approaches to media and digital literacies must be repositioned for an era of “polarization, distrust, and self-segregation” (boyd, 2017). We present a set of considerations for repositioning the literacies to focus on “being in the world with others towards a common good” (Gordon & Mihailidis, 2016, p. 2).

This article argues that the proliferation of citizen-drive spectacle is unique in its origination and perpetuation, and a direct result of an increasingly polarized and distrustful public spending an increasing amount of time in homophilous networks where contrarian views are few and far between. In his writing on media spectacle, Kellner (2009, p. 18) notes,

An informed and intelligent public thus needs to learn to deconstruct the spectacle to see what are the real issues behind the election, what interests and ideology do the candidates represent, and what sort of spin, narrative, and media spectacles are they using to sell their candidates.

While the intention of this statement remains pressing and relevant, we believe “an informed and intelligent public” may be as responsible for the spectacle as much as mainstream media.

The Spreadability of Spectacle

On December 4, 2016, Edgar Welch, a 28-year old from North Carolina, drove to Washington, D.C., armed with a rifle and handgun. Welch entered *Comet Ping Pong*

Pizzeria to release children being harbored in the restaurant as part of an alleged child sex operation run by Hillary Clinton and her aides. Armed and in the restaurant, Welch found no evidence of children being harbored and surrendered to the police.

This story, commonly referred to as *pizzagate*, is the most prominent of a recent surge of instances of what is being called *fake news*: hoax-based stories that perpetuate hearsay, rumors, and misinformation. The proliferation of fake news reached its climax in the lead up to the 2016 presidential election, culminating with Welch's entering a physical establishment where the alleged Clinton-led child harboring operation was housed. Exploring the basis for this particular story reveals an elaborate infrastructure of networked communities working to substantiate, perpetuate, and spread misinformation in spectacular fashion.

Pizzagate rumors began with the hacking and release of thousands of internal e-mails circulated by prominent members of the Democratic Party, and specifically Hillary Clinton's chief strategist, John Podesta. A diffuse online community began to deconstruct, interpret, and share insights into the e-mails, working primarily in a sub-Reddit forum dedicated to Donald Trump. The rumors gained considerable traction as more citizens contributed their theories and interpretations. Eventually, the focus turned to Comet Ping Pong Pizzeria whose owner and patrons had strong ties to the Democratic Party (#83 Voyage to Pizzagate, 2016). The #pizzagate hashtag grew swiftly and the ideas nested in Reddit began to spread to mainstream social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Aisch, Huang, & Kang, 2016). As mainstream media outlets worked to debunk the growing conspiracy theories, their reporting only legitimated the existence of the story and emboldened those perpetuating pizzagate. In particular, a detailed article debunking the pizzagate rumor published by *The New York Times*, *Dissecting the Pizzagate Conspiracy Theories*, December 10, 2016, by Gregor Aisch, Jon Huang, & Celia Kang, was challenged in social networks and one YouTube video that was viewed over 250,000 times (Kang & Goldman, 2016).

Rarely do such rumors culminate in a physical standoff involving weapons, but the emergence of the fake news phenomenon has had a considerable impact on the perceived credibility of our media systems, and democracy in general. Pizzagate is an example of what we argue is a new type of spectacle, one that no longer relies on mainstream media to sustain, but where "audiences are making their presence felt by actively shaping media flows" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 2).

The mainstream press legitimated pizzagate in their attempts to expose the facts behind the alleged story and to respond to the large and active online dialog around the rumor. At the same time, pizzagate was legitimated by political operatives in the Trump campaign, who discredited mainstream media whenever possible and actively shared misinformation on social media, with little deference to its credibility. The power of citizen-led networks to create and perpetuate misinformation is indicative of a digital media ecosystem 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 et al., 2013, p. 13).

The spread of information associated with pizzagate was propagated by a set of factors—technical, economic, structural, and content-based—that collectively support

an environment where sharing and spreadable content are paramount. These structures provide open space for like-minded individuals to gather around an idea, theory or conspiracy, and support a set of shared beliefs and ideas in any way possible. The communities that launched and spread pizzagate were legitimated by “. . . decentralized actions of people who form groups with connected fates and a common purpose” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 280). For spectacle to emerge by and with the online community, it must necessarily emerge out of a space of shared meaning, where texts and narratives reinforce the main values that networked communities adhere to. These are sustained by shared cultural attributes:

If the cultural commodities of texts do not contain resources out of which the people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities, they will be rejected and will fail in the marketplace. They will not be made popular. (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 200)

Debord (1967) explains that in society “the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images (p. 5).” In digital culture, we see networked social relationships emerge not only mediated by images but defined by mediated texts and *networked publics*: “the imagined communit[ies] that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice” (boyd, 2014, p. 19), and which benefit from social networks that are designed to support *persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability* (boyd, 2014).

Spreadable spectacle not only emerges through coordinated efforts by networked communities to spread misinformation but is also legitimated through the appropriation of cultural iconography to express views to diverse communities. The case of memes, and specifically Pepe the Frog and the “alt-right” movement, provide a compelling example of how spectacle in digital culture adopts culture commodities as a means for the appropriation of ideologies that spread, scale, and sustain.

Appropriating Spectacle

In 2008, Matt Furie’s fictional cartoon character, Pepe the Frog, gained widespread traction on Myspace, 4chan, and other online platforms, quickly becoming a popular Internet meme. The character originated from Furie’s 2005 comic, *Boy’s Club*, about a frog who was a combination of a frog face and a human body (Know Your Meme, 2016). Furie’s character lingered as a popular online figure surfacing regularly in online platforms, until 2015 when memes emerged as popular modalities for expressing political views.

Coined in 1976 by Professor Richard Dawkins, a meme is defined as “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (p. 192). Internet memes, according to Applegate and Cohen (2016), combine text and images to create a mode of communication more articulate than the emoji but less robust than the grammar and syntax of a natural language . . . [whose] “sophomoric humor is more than an end unto itself” (p. 2).

Cultural transmission, or the appropriation of content online, is now embedded in digital culture, where citizens increasingly appropriate content to insert their personal

ideas, opinions, and ideologies. With memes, individuals have the ability to bring their own meaning to an image, recreating or “remixing” its original content to generate new content with different meaning. Memes provide an accessible format for information to be shared, anchored in cultural relevance and techniques—humor, wit, and sarcasm—that are often visually pleasing and playful.

While a vast number of memes emerged in the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle, Pepe the Frog was particularly resonant because of his appropriation by the “alt-right,” a group who, according to the *Southern Poverty Law Center* (2016), is “a set of far-right ideologies, groups and individuals whose core belief is that ‘white identity’ is under attack by multicultural forces using ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’ to undermine white people and ‘their’ civilization.” Applegate and Cohen (2016) believe that Pepe’s circulation was large and distinct because: “Pepe is a rare meme—rare as a productive force of cultural appeal for those who can deftly communicate the grammar and syntax of the meme, but also in its function as a mode of visual communication” (p. 18). During the election, Donald Trump retweeted a variation of Pepe that resembled Donald Trump as a White nationalist with the slogan “You Can’t Stump the Trump,” encouraging the alt-right to continue the appropriation of Pepe. Hillary Clinton’s campaign later identified Pepe as a symbol of hate, seeing Pepe depicted as a “White nationalist icon.” The Twitter campaign, #SavePepe emerged as Pepe’s image circulated around the Internet in efforts to “reclaim” Pepe from hate groups.

The alt-right’s use of Pepe the Frog led to the declaration of Pepe as a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League, who claimed that Pepe was being used to share harmful ideologies about people of color, presidential candidates, and anti-Semitism. The Anti-Defamation League explains,

To be clear, not every instance of Pepe is hateful. It depends on the context. Using Pepe to describe how it feels when you eat your friend’s French fries or to express concern about getting your life in order: not hateful. Photoshopping Pepe in front of a concentration camp: hateful. (Roy, 2016)

The co-opting of Pepe for political means integrated seamlessly in the ongoing spectacle of the 2016 election, and specifically around Donald Trump. The same communities that were spreading pizzagate and other fake news stories, were using Pepe to advance ideologies, values, and beliefs through the appropriation of a meme.

Kellner’s articulation of “media spectacle” applies to Pepe’s wide and ever-changing appropriation: “Media spectacle is indeed a culture of celebrity who provide dominant role models and icons of fashion, look, and personality. In the world of spectacle, celebrity encompasses every major social domain from entertainment to politics to sports to business” (Kellner, 2003, p. 5). Pepe’s appropriation became a spectacle, representing different political ideologies to different individuals. Donald Trump’s endorsement of Pepe facilitated and further justified the alt-right’s use of Pepe. Pepe’s “memeification” was further spread by online communities, and co-opted by groups for specific political means.

Memes amplify messages by their nature, giving individuals the ability to appropriate content to shape and contribute their own values or beliefs around an issue. Pepe

the Frog, as a meme itself, is just that: A snippet of culture to be transmitted through modification, appropriation, and commodification by its user. While Pepe's image was used to share political ideas, the spectacle of Pepe was a significant contributor to political discourse and was a key facilitator in the circumvention of mainstream media in the process.

Mainstream Media: Legitimizing Spreadable Spectacle

In his 2015 report for Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism titled *Lies, Damn Lies, and Viral Content: How News Websites Spread (and Debunk) Online Rumors, Unverified Claims, and Misinformation*, Craig Silverman writes about the challenges news organizations face to report within the "onslaught of hoaxes, misinformation, and other forms of inaccurate content that flow constantly over digital platforms." Silverman's report explores, in great detail, the pressures that news organizations face in an ubiquitous media environment, arguing that the new digital landscape for information dissemination and sharing has placed considerable, and perhaps insurmountable, challenges on news organizations as they are currently structured. Pressures—economic, technological, political, and social—combined with the need to be constantly present, to report with equal speed and alacrity, and to gain followers in the process, has led to a landscape where "online news media are more part of the problem of online misinformation than they are the solution" (Kellner, 2003, p. 4). Writes Silverman (2015):

Lies spread much farther than the truth, and news organizations play a powerful role in making this happen. News websites dedicate far more time and resources to propagating questionable and often false claims than they do working to verify and/or debunk viral content and online rumors. Rather than acting as a source of accurate information, online media frequently promote misinformation in an attempt to drive traffic and social engagement. (p. 1)

How journalists and news organizations report truth in the digital age has been the subject of much debate. Within these debates is the need to confront reporting in what some have called "post-fact culture." Farhad Manjoo, in *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society*, details by the emergence of digital echo chambers that were created through the spread of information to like-minded communities online. Manjoo (2008) explores the fracturing of common information sources and a lack of common trust in avenues for information that have collectively led to a society that is less frequently exposed to similar sets of facts. These long standing issues arise anew in a time when bots and algorithms dominate online search and when spectacle begets facts. In an Op-Ed for *The New York Times*, William Davies (2016) sums up the situation as follows:

As politics becomes more adversarial and dominated by television performances, the status of facts in public debate rises too high. We place expectations on statistics and

expert testimony that strains them to breaking point. Rather than sit coolly outside the fray of political argument, facts are now one of the main rhetorical weapons within it. How can we still be speaking of “facts” when they no longer provide us with a reality that we all agree on?

Indeed, we are in a time when facts perhaps matter less than they have in the past. Kevin Mattson (2016) exposes this tension between fact and story: As our social media trumpets its participatory nature, our conceptions of objectivity in reporting nosedive. We are left with a world that is hostile toward any claim of expertise and that is increasingly framed by a kind of postmodern relativism.

This relativism comes at the expense of fact-driven reporting. But also emerges from a lack of demand for facts that no longer serve to unify but increasingly reinforce partisan ideologies and refute oppositional viewpoints. As a result, facts and fact checkers face an increasingly futile task of attempt to distinguish truth from lies. In *Granta*, Peter Pomerantsev (2016) notes, By the time a fact-checker has caught a lie, thousands more have been created, and the sheer volume of “disinformation cascades” make unreality unstoppable. All that matters is that the lie is clickable, and what determines that is how it feeds into people’s existing prejudices.

The question then becomes what do we expect of mainstream media and news organizations in a “post-fact culture” and what role do consumers, sharers, and publishers of news play in the declining space of truth and fact in society today. Returning to Silverman’s (2015) critique of newsrooms, he writes “. . . journalists are squandering much of the value of rumors and emerging news by moving too quickly and thoughtlessly to propagation” (p. 143). But the problem perhaps extends further for the newsroom, who by the very principle of covering lies, hearsay, and rumors, propagate such information to help fuel lies, spread information, and as a result, sustain spectacle. There have been calls for citizens to take on the role of fact checkers, but these calls often ask citizens to engage in a type of reading that is less and less likely as digital media further penetrate daily information routines. Wynne Davis (2016) outlines a series of recommendations for citizens to read like fact checkers, including “pay attention to the domain and URL; read the About Us section; look at the quotes in the story; look at who said them; check the comments; reverse image search.” These are strong recommendations and should be followed when possible. However, the reality is that in a time where citizens are reading less, monitoring more (Schudson, 1998), and are quicker to share and opine based on headlines and leads the idea that deep reading should happen with every story that circulates online is not realistic.

There have also been calls for structural changes to the online social networks and digital media sites to correct for the circulation and perpetuation of false stories online, which seem to offer strong pathways to reform (Jarvis, 2016). However, they remain far from realistic implementation, especially when large online companies like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Reddit often pride themselves on being seen as democratic front doors for citizens by allowing editorial control to rest, for the most part, with users.

In response to the emergence of spreadable spectacle, news organizations are finding themselves under increasing pressure and scrutiny to respond in proactive, dynamic

ways. Building from the tradition of media and digital literacies, we turn in our final section of the article to explore what can be done to respond to the emergence of post-fact cultures and spreadable spectacle.

How the Literacies Can Approach Spectacle in Digital Culture

For some time now, the emergence of literacies—competencies that provide citizens with the skills and dispositions to critique and create media—has been seen as a useful approach to helping people navigate an ubiquitous media age. Media literacies have been associated with increased ability to deconstruct and analyze media texts, to create and produce messages, and to engage and participate meaningfully in civic dialog (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993; Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis, 2014; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). More recently, media literacies have been applied to specific domains under the umbrella of media literacy, such as news, data, and technology, among other specific areas of inquiry (see D’Ignazio & Bhargava, 2016; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robinson, 2009; Mihailidis, 2012; Mihailidis & Craft, 2016). The proliferation of the literacies is a direct result of the centrality of media in daily life. Recent studies have found that media literacies can play a critical role in young people’s civic engagement (Hobbs, Donnelly, Friesem, & Moen, 2013), with particular emphasis on news (Ashley, Maksl, & Craft, 2013), politics (Kahne & Bowyer, 2016), and social issues (Mihailidis, 2014).

If there were ever a time for media literacies to emerge as necessary and vital to the future of democracy in the United States, it is now. A host of studies in the wake of the 2016 presidential election showed how little voters valued facts (Lehigh, 2017), leading some to speculate that an ill-informed American citizenry should shoulder the responsibility for the proliferation of misinformation in the news media. This narrative plays directly into the position of media literacy as a panacea for the spread of misinformation. It also places responsibility on the individual and justifies the viewpoint that teaching citizens how to deconstruct and critique media messages is a surefire way to combat this crisis.

However, the positioning of media literacy as a solution simplifies the problem to what is at best an unhelpful context, and at worst a red herring that exacerbates the current uproar over fake news and misinformation online. In a recent *New Republic* piece titled, “There’s a Psychological Reason for the Appeal of Fake News,” Penn State Professor S. Shyam Sundar (2016) argues that simply teaching how to discern false information from truth is only a small part of a bigger problem. He writes,

I’ve been studying the psychology of online news consumption for over two decades, and one striking finding across several experiments is that online news readers don’t seem to really care about the importance of journalistic sourcing—what we in academia refer to as “professional gatekeeping.” This laissez-faire attitude, together with the difficulty of discerning online news sources, is at the root of why so many believe fake news.

Sundar's argument sheds new light on the position of media literacy as a solution to the misinformation problem. Perhaps the U.S. electorate is not "ill-informed" so much as they would rather find information that fits their worldview. If finding truth is not as large a priority as finding personally relevant information, then what good is knowing how to critique a message in the first place? And if individuals are taught to question, critique and inquire about the credibility of media, it seems as if this technique can justify those who felt compelled to investigate the #pizzagate story in the first place.

The emergence of homophilous online networks that bypass traditional gatekeepers for information, combined with a society less trustworthy of media institutions (Kahne & Bowyer, 2016) exposes an underlying problem with normative approaches to media literacy as solutionism: that teaching how to critically read media will somehow increase trust in media. Sundar believes that the problem of trust and proliferation of misinformation has more to do with how many layers a reader must pass through to arrive at a source. "Imagine checking your Facebook news feed and seeing something your friend has shared: a politician's tweet of a newspaper story. Here, there's actually a chain of five sources (newspaper, politician, Twitter, friend, and Facebook)" (Sundar, 2016). The resulting reliance on peers as credible (enough) sources of information provides "a false sense of security," where "we become less likely to scrutinize the information in front of us."

If it is the case that our relative disinterest in sources and trust in peers is leading to a new ecosystem for consumption and sharing of news, then normative approaches to media critique and creation may fall short of effectively responding to the emergence of post-fact society, and a lack of engagement with a singular, generalizable truth. When citizens see themselves as active proponents for their personal worldviews and values, and have easy means to share them, they will likely do so and be reaffirmed by feedback from peers through shares, likes, and retweets. Furthermore, when a society like the United States begins to fracture under the pressure of increasing inequality, the notion that citizens can collectively and responsibly vet truth from misinformation seems a grandiose claim.

So what then is the role of media literacy in an increasingly partisan culture where media spectacle is spread and perpetuated by networked communities. On the formal schooling level, where media literacy pedagogy remains peripheral, work in teaching critical inquiry, analysis, and production remains a relevant and useful approach to discerning how to engage with media texts. Beyond this space, we argue for the need for the media literacy movement to respond directly to the emerging spreadable ecosystem for information, created and propagated by homophilous networks, lack of trust in gatekeepers, and what danah boyd (2017) calls in her recent essay, a "return to tribalism" where "we're undoing the social fabric of our country through polarization, distrust, and self-segregation. And whether we like it or not, our culture of doubt and critique, experience over expertise, and personal responsibility is pushing us further down this path."

Below are a series of considerations for "repositioning" media literacies to respond to the emerging phenomenon of spectacle and post-fact culture. These considerations

support the development of media literacy research, practice, and teaching directed at the critique and creation of media in support of a common good, and that can respond meaningfully in an era of spreadable spectacle.

1. *Repositioning media literacies for spreadable connectivity*: Normative approaches to critical inquiry that focus on a distanced critique of media messages is no longer sufficient in digital culture. Media literacy must focus on connecting humans, embracing differences, and finding a way to acknowledge but move past mainstream media as the point of entry for analysis.
2. *Repositioning media literacies as mechanisms for caring*: When literacies are framed around responsible consumption, they tend to focus on the tools necessary to deconstruct messages but not on the ways in which this information can facilitate *caring* for one another.² Media literacy would be well served by thinking more explicitly about how pedagogy and practice can be seen as relational and not individualistic, and focused on caring for and about, and not individual skill attainment.
3. *Repositioning media literacies as facilitators of “everyday” engagement*: Imagining media literacy as active engagement allows the process to matter as much as the outcome. Research conducted by one of this article’s authors found that by focusing media literacy on critical skill attainment alone, young people were prone to be more cynical, less willing to engage in dialog, and less trustful of media and institutions in the first place (Mihailidis, 2009). Media literacies that focus on participation in local issues can frame the critique and creation of messages as connected to one’s sense of place, belonging, and community.
4. *Reimagining media literacies as intentionally civic*: Last, media literacy as a movement has been constrained by a need to be apolitical. Much has been made about the need to teach about media’s role in society, and specifically about potentially harmful messages. These low-hanging fruits for media literacy, while relevant, perpetuate a frame of reference that sees problems as structural. Media literacy must focus on civic impact: The ways in which media can be used to impact, at realistic scale, the political, social, and cultural issues that define our democracy.

In this article, we have articulated a new ecosystem for media spectacle that is spreadable and appropriates culture at all levels. Such spectacle sustains and proliferates at the intersection of networks and values, and is legitimated through a media industry constrained by its need to build readership and acknowledge whatever those in power choose to say. Partisanship and post-fact cultures will persist and grow as digital technologies continue to facilitate homophilous networks, which rely on like-minded groups reinforcing shared values. Media literacy provides a movement that is ready to be activated as a response to the new dynamics embedded in this particular moment of heightened distrust, polarization, and partisanship.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this article we use the term “alt-right,” as it best describes the phenomenon we are writing about. We do, however, acknowledge its contested use in and by media, as articulated in Ember (2016).
2. Nel Noddings has written extensively about the role of *caring about and caring for* as an ethic that is relational, and not individualist, in its aim to connect and bring together. See Noddings (2002, 2013).

References

- #83 Voyage into Pizzagate. (2016, December 8). *Reply all* [Audio podcast]. Retrieved from <https://gimletmedia.com/episode/83-voyage-into-pizzagate/>
- Aisch, G., Huang, J., & Kang, C. (2016, December 10). Dissecting the #PizzaGate conspiracy Theories. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/10/business/media/pizzagate.html>
- Applegate, M., & Cohen, J. (2016). *Communicating diagrammatically: Mimesis, visual language, & commodification as culture*. *Cultural Politics*, 13.
- Ashley, S., Maksl, A., & Craft, S. (2013). Developing a news media literacy scale. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 68, 7-21.
- Aufderheide, P., & Firestone, C. M. (1993). *Media literacy: A report of the national leadership conference on media literacy*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- boyd, d. (2017, January 5). Did media literacy backfire? *Data & Society: Points*. Retrieved from <https://points.datasociety.net/did-media-literacy-backfire-7418c084d88d>
- Buckingham, D. (2003). *Media education: Literacy, learning and contemporary culture*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.
- Davies, W. (2016, August 24). The age of post-truth politics. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/opinion/campaign-stops/the-age-of-post-truth-politics.html>
- Davis, W. (2016, December 5). Fake news or real? How to self-check the news and get the facts: All tech considered. *NPR*. Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2016/12/05/503581220/fake-or-real-how-to-self-check-the-news-and-get-the-facts?utm_campaign=storyshare&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Dayan, D., & Katz, E. (1992). *Media events: The live broadcasting of history*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Debord, G. (1967). *The society of the spectacle*. New York, NY: Zone Books.

- D'Ignazio, C., & Bhargava, R. (2016). DataBasic: Design principles, tools and activities for data literacy learners. *Journal of Community Informatics*, 12, 83-107.
- Ember, S. (2016, November 28). News outlets rethink usage of the term "alt-right." *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/28/business/media/news-outlets-rethink-usage-of-the-term-alt-right.html>
- Gordon, E., & Mihailidis, P. (2016). *Civic media: Technology, design, practice*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hobbs, R. (2010). *Digital and media literacy: A plan of action* (A white paper on the digital and media literacy recommendations of the knight commission on the information needs of communities in a democracy). Washington, DC: Aspen Institute.
- Hobbs, R., Donnelly, K., Friesem, J., & Moen, M. (2013). Learning to engage: How positive attitudes about the news, media literacy, and video production contribute to adolescent civic engagement. *Educational Media International*, 50, 231-246.
- Jarvis, J. (2016, November 18). A call for cooperation against fake news. *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/whither-news/a-call-for-cooperation-against-fake-news-d7d94bb6e0d4#4it7h4tuh>
- Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jenkins, H., Purushotma, R., Weigel, M., Clinton, K., & Robison, A. J. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century* (Report for the MacArthur Foundation). Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Kahne, J., & Bowyer, B. (2016). Educating for democracy in a partisan age: Confronting the challenges of motivated reasoning and misinformation. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54, 3-34. doi:10.3102/0002831216679817
- Kang, C., & Goldman, A. (2016, December 5). In Washington pizzeria attack, fake news brought real guns. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/05/business/media/comet-ping-pong-pizza-shooting-fake-news-consequences.html>
- Kellner, D. (2003). Engaging media spectacle. *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture*, 6(3). Retrieved from <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0306/09-mediaspectacle.php>
- Kellner, D. (2005). *Media spectacle and the crisis of democracy: Terrorism, war, and election battles*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm.
- Kellner, D. (2009). *Media spectacle and media events: Some critical reflections*. Retrieved from https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/2009_Kellner_MediaEventsJulyFINAL.pdf
- Know Your Meme. (2016). *Pepe the Frog*. Retrieved from <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/pepe-the-frog>
- Lehigh, S. (2017, January 3). America's ill-informed electorate. *Boston Globe*. Retrieved from <http://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/columns/2017/01/03/voters-fault-doesn-lic-just-with-press/bOTozFqqAjLMi52oNp7n6L/story.html>
- Littleton, C., & Schwindt, O. (2016, October 20). *Final ratings for third Donald Trump-Hillary Clinton debate: 71.6 Million*. Retrieved from <http://variety.com/2016/tv/news/tv-ratings-donald-trump-hillary-clinton-final-debate-1201895174/>
- Manjoo, F. (2008). *True enough: Learning to live in a post-fact society*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Mattson, K. (2016, August 16). Are we living in post-fact times? *Democracy*. Retrieved from <http://democracyjournal.org/alcove/are-we-living-in-post-fact-times/>
- Mihailidis, P. (2009). *Beyond cynicism: How media literacy can make students more engaged citizens* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Maryland). Retrieved from <http://drum.lib.umd.edu/handle/1903/8301>

- Mihailidis, P. (2012). *News literacy: Global perspectives for the newsroom and the classroom*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Mihailidis, P. (2014). *Media literacy and the emerging citizen: Youth, engagement and participation in digital culture*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Mihailidis, P., & Craft, S. (Eds.). (2016). Exploring news literacy: Preparing future journalists—and citizens—for engagement in global digital culture. *Journalism Education*, 5(1). Retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/27138511/Exploring_News_Literacy_Preparing_future_journalists_and_citizens_for_engagement_in_global_digital_culture
- Mihailidis, P., & Thevenin, B. (2013). Media literacy as a core competency for engaged citizenship in participatory democracy. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57, 1611-1622.
- Noddings, N. (2002). *Educating moral people: A caring alternative to character education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Pomerantsev, P. (2016, July 20). Why we're post-fact. *Granta*. Retrieved from <https://granta.com/why-were-post-fact/>
- Roy, J. (2016, October 11). How "Pepe the Frog" went from harmless to hate symbol. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-pepe-the-frog-hate-symbol-20161011-snap-htmlstory.html>
- Schudson, M. (1998). *Changing concepts of democracy*. Retrieved from <http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/articles/schudson.html>
- Silverman, C. (2015). *Lies, damn lies, and viral content: How news websites spread (and debunk) online rumors, unverified claims, and misinformation*. Retrieved from http://tow-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/LiesDamnLies_Silverman_TowCenter.pdf
- Southern Poverty Law Center. (2016). *Alternative Right*. Retrieved from <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alternative-right>
- Sundar, S. S. (2016, December 8). There's a psychological reason for the appeal of fake news. *New Republic*. Retrieved from <https://newrepublic.com/article/139230/theres-psychological-reason-appeal-fake-news>

Author Biographies

Paul Mihailidis is an associate professor in the school of communication at Emerson College in Boston, MA, where he teaches media literacy, civic media, and community activism. He is founding program director of the MA in Civic Media: Art & Practice and a Principle Investigator and Faculty Director of the Engagement Lab at Emerson College. Mihailidis also directs the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change. His research focuses on the nexus of media, education, and civic voices. His newest books, *Civic Agency* (Routledge 2018), *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice* (2016, MIT Press, with Eric Gordon) and *Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen* (Peter Lang, 2014), outlines effective practices for participatory citizenship and engagement in digital culture. Mihailidis co-edits the *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, and sits on the advisory board for *iCivics*. He earned his PhD from the Phillip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Samantha Viotty is currently pursuing an MA in Civic Media, Art & Practice at the Engagement Lab at Emerson College. Working with the Engagement Lab, she creates programming that for teens that explores how media and data literacies impact learning about local civic and social issues, focusing on marginalized communities and technological empowerment. She received a BA in Film & New Media Studies at Wheaton College, with an emphasis on race, class, and gender.