

Schriften zur Medienpädagogik 54

Futurelab Medienpädagogik

Qualitätsentwicklung – Professionalisierung – Standards

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Renee Hobbs

How Digital Media Alter Concepts of Authority and Expertise

Today, the theoretical and practical dimensions of Media Literacy Education can be applied to address the challenges of disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy theories and more. Media Literacy educators are being challenged to explore choice overload, performative sharing and attention economics in order to help people acquire new competencies in understanding how authority is constructed and contextualized in a digital age.

Sometimes people ask me about whether or not Media Literacy is being replaced by Digital Literacy. That is because people generally think of Media Literacy as the practice of analyzing advertising, film, news and entertainment. Some acknowledge that Media Literacy includes the practice of *creating* media, *using* images, language and sounds to convey meaning. Others appreciate Media Literacy for its emphasis on issues of media ownership and representation. When they hear the term *Digital Literacy*, they think of the skills involved in navigating the online environment, being a socially responsible user of social media, and analyzing the credibility of news and information.

I like to say that Media Literacy is an expanded conceptualization of literacy. What is literacy? It is defined as the sharing of meaning in symbolic form. Of course, literacy has been expanding and changing for thousands of years. Early forms of literacy, or *rhetoric*, were the use of oral language as a way of attaining influence and power. Classical scholars were well versed in this ancient art and it has continued to evolve into systems of symbolic expression, technology and media change. Literacy is evolving; at its core, we are all involved as consumers and producers, irrespective of whether we are taking and sharing a photo, a voice message, a text message, or we are sharing meaning through symbols (Hobbs 2017).

When we think of literacy as a process, we think of our ability to access, analyze, and create messages, to reflect on them, and then use the power of information and communication to make a difference in the world, to take social action. This spiral of learning processes was first advanced by the Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire who wrote the seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). He understood how literacy could in fact empower workers to be citizens, to gain a conscious awareness of their condition, express themselves and work for democratic change. Today, Media Literacy

educators value this fundamental pedagogical process and we try to embed it in all of the many ways we teach and learn.

Today, the theoretical and practical dimensions of Media Literacy Education can be applied to address the challenges of disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy theories and more. To understand Media Literacy Education, we must consider the single most important paradox of our time, namely how to deal with the problems and opportunities presented by *choice overload* (Webster/Ksiazek 2012). This is a problem that affects young and old alike, all over the world.

Many of the joys and tribulations of our time are the result of choice overload. We have a love-hate relationship with the range of choices available to us: There are too many songs to listen to, too many movies to watch, and then there are the 500 channels of cable or satellite TV; there are so many books to read; the choices on YouTube are simply astounding. Because we users only have a short attention span and a limited amount of time, we may or may not make informed choices. Furthermore, we don't generally experience these choices as separate spheres in which entertainment, information, and persuasion are selected strategically and purposefully (Hobbs 2015). The blurring of lines between information, entertainment and persuasion is a significant cultural phenomenon and it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between these rhetorical purposes as they become ever more interwoven and interconnected. For example, although I try to use information and news media in the morning and save my entertainment for the evening, I do in fact also learn from entertainment media in the evenings when I watch a crime drama. Although it is designed as entertainment, for me it is also sometimes informational.

The cultural environment of choice overload has helped to create a near-perfect recipe for the rise of so-called *fake news*. As a result, Media Literacy educators are exploring choice overload, performative sharing and attention economics in order to help people acquire new strategies for dealing with disinformation, clickbait, conspiracy theories and more.

Beyond Fake News: New Realities in a Networked Information Ecosystem

The new realities in our networked global society have been shaped by our information environment, some characteristics of which have changed radically in just the last ten years. Firstly, it costs nothing to produce content – and by the way, you don't need a college degree. Secondly, there's a huge fragmentation of both the content we receive and the content we produce

which, as mentioned above, has led to the problem of choice overload. Third, the interface between social media and mass media has increased the virality of media messages. Large numbers of people are discovering how to use the power of communication design to make something viral go viral. Producers have learned that the virality formula is rooted in sensationalism (Tucker 2014). Media-literate people recognize the formula easily: It includes content that features sex, violence, children, animals and UFOs, the topics that compel our attention. When these messages are created in ways that arouse powerful emotions like suspense and surprise, or feature attractive people who compel our attention and inspire feelings of identification, they break through the clutter of choices to capture the public's attention (Hobbs 2015).

Finally, the rise of so-called fake news has been driven by the changing ecosystem of the networked information environment. Much media content is consumed as unbundled snippets on social media. Most of us now get most of our information and news from Facebook. We encounter news as a little segment, shared by our friends, and it's not always clear where that news actually comes from. Who created it? It's not always clear, and it takes a couple more clicks if we want to find out. We experience news in decontextualized ways, without understanding much about the authors and their intentions (Hull/Lipford/Latulipe 2011).

As a Media Literacy activist, I'm dedicated to making sure that every Internet user understands the power of content marketing. Millions of users fail to understand the economics of those attractive images with their appealing headlines that appear at the bottom of many websites and that show up on your social media feeds. Unlike traditional marketing, content marketing has no sales pitch. It does not try to directly advertise or sell a particular brand, product or service. By providing information that is educational, entertaining or emotionally satisfying, content marketing generates an interest in and an awareness of the brand and its offerings. Sometimes, content marketing is a kind of nudge, a subtle type of persuasion that gently moves the audience to convert their interest into some form of online action (Sunstein 2014).

Some people think that platform companies will solve the problem of fake news by designing algorithms to limit our exposure to it. They have experimented with labeling content so that when you see it in your Facebook it will be labeled with terms like hoax, satire or disinformation. They say, "We will adjust the algorithm, so that if the content has very poor quality, you will never see it." But Media Literacy educators, researchers and activists wonder what signals of quality will be used. We recognize the

risks of one company determining and labeling online content. Although people today seem to worship the power of digital technology, we can't be fooled into thinking that algorithms are neutral. Algorithms are constructed by people: as a result, they have an author, a purpose, a bias and a point of view (Knaus 2017). Although we may not notice it, algorithms reproduce social inequalities, including racism and sexism (Noble 2018).

The Limits of Human Information Processing

For millions of years, human evolution has honed our ability to pay attention to changing visual displays. We're built to trust what people in our tribe tell us they have experienced. We seek information for purposes of reality maintenance. The fundamental characteristics of human information processing are very stable.

Journalists might be heartbroken to hear this, but people don't look to journalism to learn new things. We look to journalism to make sure the world is still in place. It has been called *reality maintenance* and it is the phenomenon of using news and current events merely as a form of surveillance, not as a means for learning and understanding. When it comes to new information, we're hard-wired to compare and evaluate incoming information in relation to the knowledge and beliefs we already possess. Scientists have given names like *selective exposure* and *confirmation bias* to describe how we make choices about what to pay attention to and how we interpret and value it. People are naturally more critical of information that does not match their existing beliefs (Martens/Hobbs 2015).

Today, another essential feature of human information processing is sometimes called *performative sharing* (Mauthner 2014). When I make a decision to share content with my 6,000 Twitter followers, I choose content that makes me look smart and makes me look good. When I share content, I am making decisions about what aspects of my identity I am trying to convey to my tribe, my peer group, or the people in my social network. Because everyone in my social network is sharing to make themselves look good, this creates a bias of sorts. It's a part of human information processing: it's now basically a truism that you are what you share. You are what you share. Okay, now if that's true, it's no longer surprising that 60 percent of people share content without reading or viewing it. Many of us are guilty of having done this. I admit that I have shared content without reading or viewing it myself. Have you shared content without reading or viewing it? It's a practice we have to unlearn, but we know we don't have to feel guilty about it. We understand that the characteristics of human

information processing, plus the networked environment, have normalized these behaviors.

Because these features exist in the cultural information environment, new forms of authority and expertise are emerging. To understand them, we must consider how *attention economics* (Goldhaber 1997) are surpassing traditional forms of authority and expertise. I can say with absolute certainty that the current U.S. President is very skillful at manipulating attention economics. In fact, his primary authority and expertise lies in his ability to attract and hold public attention. As we can see, this skill is becoming more valuable than knowledge, expertise and competence.

Attention economics is built on four features: If you're fast at getting ideas across, you will get people's attention. Immediacy is important. If you are able to personalize messages, sending unique messages to individuals that relate directly to them, you will get people's attention. Look at the people on Twitter or Facebook that have the largest networks; their style of interacting is highly personalized because that is how to command authority. That's how they have expertise. Attention economics also includes the ability to put information into an interpretive frame: to tell a story and create a narrative that makes sense and connects to audiences. Of course you have to be findable if you want to exercise this kind of authority. That means you have to know how to tag your content in ways that are sensitive to the way your audience is likely to find you. Whether we like it or not, these four practices are becoming more important than traditional forms of authority which are rooted in social position and knowledge.

How Media Literacy Helps

Fortunately, we see some research evidence that Media Literacy can compensate for the problems of choice overload, performative sharing and attention economics by helping people acquire new strategies for dealing with disinformation, clickbait, conspiracy theories and partisan political messages.

Take for example the work of Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer (2016). They conducted an experiment with a very large sample of 1,500 American young adults aged 15 to 27, measuring their political affiliation on a scale from liberal to conservative. They then showed them different kinds of fake news: some was very emotional, some used accurate supporting evidence, and some was misinformation.

When people were asked to evaluate the accuracy of misinformation, and emotional and evidence-based arguments, it turns out that their po-

litical ideology was the best predictor of whether they thought something was believable or not. This is not surprising. Naturally, due to *confirmation bias*, the conservatives thought the conservative information was true. The liberals thought the liberal information was true.

However, participants who reported that they had received more exposure to Media Literacy education made a clear distinction between evidence-based arguments and misinformation. They were less likely to believe inaccurate and emotional messages even when the ideas matched their existing political ideology. Researchers found statistically significant differences between people with higher and lower levels of exposure to Media Literacy Education (Kahne/Bowyer 2016). They measured exposure to Media Literacy Education by asking these two questions:

- When you were in school, how often did you discuss how to tell if the information you find online is trustworthy?
- How often have you discussed the importance of evaluating the evidence that backs up people's opinions?

Most of the Europeans I meet say that in high school or college they were rarely if ever exposed to discussions or activities where such topics and issues were explored. In California – where this study was carried out – only 30 percent of the sample (youth ages 15–25) reported any exposure to such educational discussions.

At the heart of this measure of exposure to Media Literacy is a focus on evaluating evidence and understanding the constructed nature of authority and expertise. As the *Association for College and Research Libraries* explains in the *Standards for Information Literacy*,

"[...] information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility, and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required" (2016: 1).

If we understand authority as a type of influence which is recognized or exerted within a community, we can approach it with an attitude of informed skepticism. We can appreciate the contributions of experts and, by noticing omissions, we demonstrate how we value new perspectives and changes in schools of thought that occur over time. To determine the validity of

information, we must acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others. As the librarians explain it:

"An understanding of this concept enables novice learners to critically examine all evidence — be it a short blog post or a peer-reviewed conference proceeding — and to ask relevant questions about origins, context, and suitability for the current information need" (ACRL 2016: 1).

When authority and expertise is recognized as a construction, then learners begin to see that they are part of the system, not only as consumers of knowledge but as producers of it. By creating media, students develop their own sense of authority and expertise (Hobbs 2016), recognizing the responsibilities involved in aiming for accuracy, respecting intellectual property, and being aware of the increasingly social nature of the information ecosystem where authorities actively connect with one another and knowledge develops over time.

We need to keep at it to reach a critical mass. Media Literacy educators and activists are dedicated to ensuring that these learning experiences take place in schools all around the world. We can't wait for policy makers and education ministers to figure out how to support this work. We have to figure it out for ourselves and that's why researchers and teachers, working together, are the major heroes in my world.

The robust and creative exploration of Media Literacy as it applies to our new media environment and the challenges and opportunities created by choice overload and performative sharing, will enable us to discover the pedagogies that increase awareness, promote critical analysis and reflective insight, and enable people to participate in the digital world in ways that maximize both human freedom and social responsibility.

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