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Media Literacy for the 21st Century

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Abstract

We cannot pretend to educate young people for citizenship and political participation without teaching them to understand and use the new media, which are essential means of expressing ideas, forming public opinions, and building institutions and movements. But the challenge of media literacy education is serious. Students need advanced and constantly changing skills to be effective online. They must understand the relationship between the new media and social and political institutions, a topic that is little understood by even the most advanced social theorists. And they must develop motivations to use digital media for civic purposes, when no major institutions have incentives to motivate them. Until we address those challenges, students will struggle to make sense of the new media environment, let alone take constructive action.

This article is a response to:

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Stoddard (2014) is right; electronic media now provide the main means of expressing ideas, forming public opinion, and building institutions and movements. These media work for good and for ill—as instruments of enlightenment and emancipation and also as tools of propaganda and division. Thus, we cannot pretend to educate young people for citizenship and political participation without teaching them to understand and use the new media. As one of the authors of the *C3 Framework for College, Career, and Civic Life*, I agree that our framework gives too little attention to media and the need for media education. Stoddard's critique is welcome and important.

The advantages and drawbacks of the new media landscape are difficult to assess (let alone predict), because the Internet is unimaginably vast and rapidly changing. Not long ago, one of the main concerns was anonymity: online, people could express views without being identified with their real names and faces. On one hand, anonymity might promote freedom and equality: "On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog" (Steiner, 1993). On the other hand, anonymity might encourage incivility and a lack of accountability or even outright criminal behavior. But then

Facebook built a network of 1.3 billion active users that requires individuals to use their real names and that most people employ to share their physical lives through images and text. Anonymity is no longer the main issue.

Instead, we confront a world, as Stoddard writes, in which just a few powerful organizations can determine what we see online and can use our online behavior to track, analyze, and influence us. For example, algorithms created and refined by Facebook and Google decide what content appears when we open those organizations' websites, and both companies follow our journeys around

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cyberspace. As Stoddard (2014) says, "The reality is that the vast amount of media traffic is still controlled by the political and media elite" (p. 2).

At the same time, as he notes just a few paragraphs later, we should also worry about individuals' ability "to control which news sources and media they access" (Stoddard, 2014, p. 2). A high degree of individual choice can cause public opinion to balkanize. These concerns appear to be opposites (first too little freedom and then too much of it), but they can go together if a major company like Facebook creates and owns a space in which opinion is balkanized—and shares the resulting data with governments.

As another example of the uncertain and rapidly changing environment, Stoddard (2014) notes that vastly more private money was raised in the 2012 U.S. elections than ever before. The impact, he wrote, "is up for debate, as many of the largest organizations on the conservative end of the political spectrum did not get much return on their donors' investments" (p. 2). In fact, they generally used the Internet and social media to raise money but spent the funds on traditional broadcast media. It is not clear that they were ineffective; they may simply have reached a stalemate with their almost-as-well-funded Democratic opponents. But it remains to be seen whether a dollar of campaign spending will be worth less, the same, or more than it was when most people watched broadcast television. More generally, it remains to be seen what political campaigning will be like when its main medium is the Internet instead of television.

Students should understand these phenomena and should learn to navigate the new media, both to serve their own interests and in order to debate and advance the common good. As Stoddard (2014) notes, we might start by encouraging them to use the new media both to address real issues in their communities and to role-play the functions of politicians, media executives, and other powerful adults. I am all for these forms of pedagogy.

But I would like to underline how serious a challenge we face in trying to educate youth for political and civic engagement in the new media environment.

First is the problem of skills. Even if the skills necessary for effective engagement are no more difficult than they were fifty years ago, they are changing so rapidly that curricula, educational tools, and teachers cannot easily keep up. Since ancient Greece, teachers have often asked their students to practice speeches in front of an audience. That skill may be harder than recording a video and posting it online—but now you have to do *both*, and teachers may not know how to do the latter effectively.

Producing media is a skill within the reach of many young people. Almost a quarter of American teens post videos of themselves online, for example (Pew Research, 2012). But creating media that actually draws a substantial audience and influences and motivates people outside of our immediate circles is much harder. Some young people create media products that "go viral" and change the world. They are easy to identify because their experiences are so exceptional. The average photo, video, or paragraph is seen by just a few people, usually close friends who already hold similar views and interests. Of course, developing a persona and sharing ideas within a close network are valid

activities. But we also want young people to be able to communicate to strangers and to others who disagree. Teaching youth to find a public voice is a challenge (Levine, 2007).

A second challenge is understanding the new social reality. Even the most sophisticated analysts of the current media landscape do not know what to make of it, nor do they share a common basis for debate. By way of contrast, consider the U.S. government as an institution that students should understand in order to critically assess it. To be sure, the government is large and complex, it has changed over time, and it has both proponents and sharp critics. Yet it has one fundamental document (the Constitution) and one impressive justification (in the Federalist Papers) that provide focal points of debate. Students can learn a lot by reading the Constitution, some of the Federalist Papers, and some critics of the Constitution and then applying their knowledge through discussions of historical and current controversies.

In contrast, Web 2.0 has no constitution and no federalist papers. I admire perceptive theorists of the new media landscape: Benkler (2006), boyd (2008), Castells (2000), Lessig (2000), Shirky (2008), Sunstein (2007), and others. None of these authors would claim to be the James Madison of cyberspace. They did not have the authority to write its fundamental rules, and they have not offered highly general justifications of it. Their writing is too difficult to be assigned directly in most K–12 classrooms. Their scholarship has not been digested for youth audiences, nor has it prominent expression in political discourse. If there is a Gettysburg Address for the new media environment, I have not seen it (possibly because the algorithms of the services I use did not choose to show it to me).

I do not presume that the U.S. Constitution is preferable to the rules of cyberspace or that the framers of the Constitution are more admirable than the architects of the digital world. The Constitution requires critical evaluation; the Internet has attractive features. I would simply assert that it is harder to *understand* cyberspace than the U.S. government because only the latter has an authoritative code (the Constitution) and official justifications that we can read and critically evaluate.

A third challenge is motivation. Civic engagement in the new media environment requires choice. Choice among news sources, political movements and organizations, and leaders is good: It empowers the citizen. Students who are interested in politics and civic life or who find themselves in a setting, such as a good civics class, where they *must* address politics will benefit from having an unprecedented array of choice online.

The problem is that one can also choose whether to be interested in politics or civic life at all. Traditionally, a person may have joined a union because the workplace was unionized, a church because parents already belonged or because the person wanted to save his or her soul, and a political party because it offered concrete benefits, such as job opportunities. Someone may have subscribed to a daily newspaper to get the classifieds and the comics and watched evening television for the comedies. But all those institutions had incentives to make people at least somewhat interested in news, public issues, and civic engagement. The daily newspaper wanted people to read the front page; the networks

were legally obligated to provide nightly news; unions, churches, and parties wanted their members to vote and wanted some to emerge as leaders.

Those institutions had civic consequences but did not require civic motivations. In contrast, a forum like Facebook or Twitter—like the Internet as a whole—allows users to decide whether to think and talk about civic matters. Most people will not. Very few organizations have incentives to recruit people into genuine political engagement, and some have incentives to distract us from politics. Thus, in addition to the challenges of skills and understanding noted already, we also face a profound challenge of motivation.

A true "popular education" approach would build skills, understanding, and motivations from the bottom up by asking students and teachers to explore and critically assess the media environments around them. They would create their own knowledge and action. I see value to that strategy but I doubt that students and teachers will get far enough or fast enough on their own. They need the kinds of intellectual scaffolding that their predecessors could use fifty years ago to navigate their social environments: various well-developed social theories, rival sociopolitical movements that were looking for members, and prominent contemporary thinkers of various stripes. We have created a world for our young people that is relatively weak in all those respects. Social theory has lagged behind social and technological change. Social movements are weak and fragmented. Until we address those deficits, students will struggle to make sense of their environments, let alone take constructive action.

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