

Civic Engagement, Social Justice, and Media Literacy

Srividya Ramasubramanian, Texas A&M University

Ramin Chaboki Darzabi, Texas A&M University

Author Bios:

Srividya “Srivi” Ramasubramanian (Ph.D., Penn State University) is Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University. Her research focuses on critical media literacy, social justice, media activism, prejudice reduction, diversity, and identity. She was awarded the 2017 Outstanding Media Literacy Research Award by the National Association for Media Literacy Education.

Ramin Chaboki Darzabi is a Ph.D. student in Communication at Texas A&M University. His research areas are media literacy, online activism, digital media, identity, and stereotype reduction. His master’s thesis was on developing media literacy in Iran.

Abstract

Connecting media literacy to the ethical, social, and emancipatory aspects of information societies within media-saturated convergence culture is an essential task in conceptualizing active digital citizenship. In this chapter we argue that media literacy's full potential cannot be expressed unless the transformative power of digital new media is garnered for social justice and civic agency. With rising political partisanship, economic inequalities, and global climate change, media literacy can and should empower and support citizens' engagement through the processes of using and producing messages. We need to be intentional about incorporating anti-oppression pedagogy, media activism, and critical consciousness into media literacy education, research, teaching, and praxis.

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With mainstream media perpetuating partisan politics and populist rhetoric, there is an increase in vitriolic hate online, spread of sensationalism, and easy dissemination of misinformation in what has been referred to as an era of “spreadable spectacle” in “post-fact” societies (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Silverman, 2015). In this chapter, we argue that there is an urgent need to counter these divisive forces and toxicity by refocusing media literacy pedagogy and praxis towards social justice and civic empowerment. Going beyond traditional definitions of media literacy as the ability to access, evaluate, and produce media, we expand the notion of media literacy to incorporate social responsibility, critical civic consciousness, and anti-oppression pedagogy. We argue that without a critical media literacy approach that is explicitly aimed at dismantling social injustices and structural inequalities through civic engagement, the participatory power of digital media could be left untouched, or worse, used for furthering fascism, imperialism, patriarchy, and other systems of domination. We end the chapter with some recommendations and guidelines for consideration by media literacy scholars and practitioners.

Critical Pedagogies, Engaged Citizenship, and Participatory Media Cultures

Contemporary educational paradigms have moved towards active experiential learning through collaboration and mutual respect, using the resources available to them. Critical approaches to literacy place emphasis on legitimizing the cultural and social capital that learners bring to their learning spaces. Instead of passively consuming dominant texts that reproduce mainstream ideologies, this approach focuses less on comprehension and analysis and more on the potential for social transformation and socio-political change (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Expanding the concept of literacy, digital and media literacies offer opportunities in both formal and informal ways to contribute to fostering the competencies, skills, and knowledge needed for civic engagement. Critical pedagogy helps us reimagine the relationships among media, popular culture, education, and power. Media culture can serve as a learning space for fostering critical awareness, civic consciousness, and identity development. Media literate people are able to identify different agendas including personal, corporate, and political ones and also use media as a tool for civic actions.

In identifying the core competencies of media literacy, beyond the traditional definition of media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages (Aufderheide, 1993), Hobbs (2010) includes the ability to engage in reflection and being active in community. *Reflection* is defined as “applying social responsibility and ethical principles to one’s own identity and lived experience, communication behavior and conduct” while *action* is defined as “working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, the workplace and the community, and participating as a member of a community at local, regional, national and international levels” (Hobbs, 2010, p. 19). These last two aspects of media literacy - *reflection* and *action* - emphasize that media literacy should include social responsibility, collaborative work, and ethical considerations in the service of one’s family, workplace, and community at various levels beyond simply for the sake of gratifying individual needs and personal growth. Similarly, Mihailidis (2014) presents the 5A’s framework incorporating access, awareness, assessment, appreciation, and action where civic engagement is emphasized especially in the “action” aspect of the framework.

The notion of *engaged citizenship* is central to civic participation. Traditionally, citizenship has been conceptualized as legal members of a nation-state (see Choi, 2016 for a

detailed analysis). However, citizenship is much more than just a legal or administrative definition in terms of an individual's relationship to a nation or state. It is about identity and a sense of community. It is a certain mindset and approach to life where one acts in ethical and socially responsible ways towards social justice. Gozávez & Contreras-Pulido (2014) discuss various types of citizenship: *political citizenship* as active participation in public affairs, *social citizenship* as working towards social welfare of all in a society, *economic citizenship* as responsible consumption and business activities, *ecological citizenship* as fostering civic values of environmental sustainability, and *global/cosmopolitan citizenship* as appreciation for cultural diversity.

In today's ubiquitous mediated contexts, to be a fully active citizen, one should also incorporate *media citizenship*, where citizens not only have access to media technologies but are provided the skillsets and means to process information and produce content effectively. *Digital citizenship* has been conceptualized as the ability to use digital media technologies to their full potential through creative expression, economic attainment, political participation, and civic engagement, especially in the context of older adults (Mossberger, Tolbert & Stansbury, 2003).

More recently, Choi (2016) has conducted content analysis about the concept of digital citizenship to uncover the various elements associated with this concept within participatory spreadable convergence media cultures. They delineate four different ways in which digital citizenship is understood and practiced: *ethics, media and information literacy, participation/engagement, and critical resistance*. Ethical approaches to digital citizenship emphasize how to use digital media in safe, ethical, and responsible ways. The media and information literacy perspective focuses on critical competencies needed to access, analyze,

evaluate, and produce media in online contexts. The participation/engagement aspects of digital citizenship includes political participation such as online petitions, deliberations on public policies, and e-voting but also non-traditional micro-forms of civic engagement in everyday activities. Finally, digital citizenship as resistance takes a more critical and radical perspective that challenges existing power structures in online spaces.

Within the context of the proliferation of new media technologies in the participatory convergence culture, contemporary critical literacy scholars have to contend with the fact that how individuals learn from media has changed dramatically. Digital citizens today are reading, producing, curating, archiving, repurposing, and recirculating media content, often doing all of these several times a day (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). This *participatory media culture* within digital contexts is shaping identities, social relationships, collaboration, and community building. Social media platforms have created what is referred to as *networked publics* (Castells, 2012) that have facilitated both large-scale socio-political movements such as Arab Spring and #MeToo but also created a sense of more personal agency in everyday engagement with social causes. Beyond access to digital technologies, media literacy education focuses on overcoming the *participation gap* (Jenkins, 2006) so that digital citizens can participate fully and engage freely the various aspects of media and technology.

As we work to promote active citizenship within the shifting digital environments, we need to use a critical lens to examine how power, privilege, and social capital continue to be renegotiated in these digital spaces. One of the concerns has been the rapid homogenization of mainstream content and a focus on neoliberal capitalism where transmedia digital storytelling has focused much more on global brands rather than on promoting civic empowerment for social justice (Ramasubramanian, 2016). Another issue is the focus on self-promotion and

branding at the individual level without using the transformative power of digital new media technologies to foster social change. Media literacy education without a clear civic focus has often facilitated what has been referred to as *mecosystem* (Interbrand, n.d), which focuses on the individual level of creative expression, self-branding, and self discovery through media rather than on social justice, political participation, and civic engagement. We argue that from a critical digital media literacy perspective, media and technology should be used as tools to create safe spaces for meaningful dialogue, for re-negotiating and affirming the identities of stigmatized groups, and fostering social transformation.

Civic Engagement, Political Participation, and Community-Building

Mere active engagement on the Internet does not lead to civic engagement. However, digital new media technologies can serve as excellent avenues for learning about civic participation and community-building. Civic engagement includes both informal and formal political participation as well as community participation. Traditionally, civic engagement has focused on political actions such as voting in elections, contacting elected officials, attending town hall meetings, and knowledge about political parties, which has arguably decreased among youth today who are active in digital spaces (Bennett, 2008; Putnam, 2000). However, when we take a broader definition of civic engagement to go beyond political engagement to also include community-building and service activities such as fundraising, volunteering, petitioning for a cause, then we see that active digital participation online, especially among youth, enable such civic actions (Martens & Hobbs, 2015).

In terms of *political participation*, traditional definitions focus on civic duties such as voting and party affiliation at the local, state, and national levels but more recent definitions emphasize the civic, social, and economic aspects of being part of a community (Choi, 2016).

Rather than enacting *dutiful citizenship*, which is driven by a sense of civic responsibility to vote, attend town hall meetings, and engage in traditional political activities, digital natives of today envision citizenship as *engaged citizenship*, that is a more expanded notion of political participation that involves informal networks and online communities (Bennett, 2008). Banaji and Buckingham (2013) remind us that civic engagement in digital environments is more fluid than how it has been conventionally conceptualized and tends to happen at irregular intervals, emerging from within specific contexts in organic ways. That is, rather than civic engagement for the sake of civic duty, digital citizens today express engaged citizenship through more dynamic notions of participatory politics such as blogging, online petitions, charity fundraisers, and so on. It is highly likely that those who are active politically and engaged civically online are also doing so offline. Therefore, isolating the unique effects of media literacy education is a challenging task. Nevertheless, exploratory survey research by Martens and Hobbs (2015) demonstrates that after controlling for demographic variables such as age, income, and education, digital media literacy is positively correlated with intention toward civic engagement.

What this dynamic, more informal, and broader conceptualization of engaged digital citizenship online looks like could range from organizing flash mobs, creating online campaigns for social awareness, playing mobile phone games that could raise awareness about environmental issues, and creating memes to use humor to challenge cultural stereotypes (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). These activities could at times combine fun and play with more serious conversations and could cover a range of socio-cultural and political issues beyond traditional notions of political participation.

Media literacy is an important competency needed for civic agency and citizen engagement. Active participation online can help forge social bonds and friendships, which could lay the foundation for civic engagement and political participation. A solid foundation in media literacy education teaches how to ask good questions, seek relevant information, assess the quality and credibility of the information, discuss issues with others, express your views effectively, and collaborate with others to take collective action. All of these competencies relating to critical thinking, active reasoning, collaboration learning, information seeking, and respect for difference are essential for active participation in the public sphere on social-political issues as part of civic engagement.

Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013) suggest three critical media literacy outcomes that make media literacy necessary for civic engagement: *critical thinkers, creators and communicators, and agents of social change*. They believe that in the 21st century, all citizens should be critical thinkers to be capable of analyzing and evaluating information on which build their civic engagement. Through critical thinking, people are able to collect accurate facts about their community and also challenge the power. From this perspective, civic media literacy makes people ready to participate in community effectively “by helping them analyze mediated representations of their communities, as well as address issues within their communities” (p.1615). Critical media literate citizens are able to express their unique perspectives on different issues in their communities and develop new ways for circulating their ideas. Encouraging citizens to act as agents of social change is a crucial outcome that critical media literacy approaches focus on. These scholars argue that media literacy helps people “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”(p. 1616).

Building on these contemporary notions of engaged digital citizenship for civic participation, McDougall and colleagues (2015) propose a three step research methodology for incorporating civic engagement into media literacy curriculum that incorporates Mihailidis’s 5A’s framework (2014). In step 1, which focuses on access and appreciation, participants use survey methods to complete an online profiling map of media engagement. In the next step, which emphasizes awareness and assessment, participants conducted fieldwork based on interviews about their media usage and critical use of media texts. In the final stage, which corresponds with the “Action” aspect of the 5A’s framework, participants engaged in an online creative political task. Here participants had to complete a creative task with the explicit purpose of civic engagement where the media products had to be shared with a broader audience who were then engaged in conversations within a three week period.

One of the limitations of using such a framework for teaching how to incorporate civic engagement in media literacy is that in the real world, such civic engagement typically happens in organic ways. Forcing learners to deliberately make their creative work public and encouraging them to engage with an audience might not be a natural way in which such civic actions typically take place in voluntary ways within specific contexts of online communities. Another related concern is that it is difficult to isolate the unique effects of media literacy education in serving as a catalyst to promote civic engagement, making the research aspects of examining the relationship between media literacy interventions and civic engagement a challenging one for media scholars.

Social Justice, Anti-Oppression Pedagogy, and Media Activism

Participation and active engagement alone are not sufficient when it comes to media literacy. With the political re-emergence of populism, fascism, and alt-right around the world, media literacy stands at a critical juncture. Online communities are often self-segregated echo chambers that serve as homophilous networks where dissent is vehemently silenced. As more community members contribute to the sharing and recirculation of rumors and false information, it can quickly work to delegitimize news outlets, strengthen conspiracy theories, and lead to confusion about what is fact and what is reality (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Silverman, 2015). The increase in hateful rhetoric online by white supremacists, nationalists, and neo-Nazis points to how the spreadability and anonymity of media can be misused for virulent hate, bigotry, and terror (Ramasubramanian & Miles, 2018). Unless we explicitly link media literacy education to the decolonial project of emancipation and dismantling of social inequalities, the participatory power of spreadable media ecosystem could easily be used to create, perpetuate, and spread misinformation, false rumors, gossip, and hearsay. They can lead to reinforcing rather than questioning status quo power relations.

Anti-oppression pedagogy is an important part of fostering social justice orientation into media literacy education. Social justice scholarship and pedagogy challenges the status quo, questions power imbalances, and works to reduce social inequalities. It is explicitly critical in its approach and works towards dismantling structural inequities and questions hierarchical ideologies. Ranieri and Fabbro (2016) argue that media literacy can provide the opportunity for individuals to develop their participatory abilities especially by challenging various ways in which existing systems might lead to discriminatory practices and social inequalities. Media literate citizens are motivated to share their ideas about and question discrimination in their

community. This critical consciousness about addressing power differences and achieving equity is an important aspect of civic engagement.

Scholars make a distinction between critical scholarship from a “first-person perspective” of being directly involved in political action, social movements, and social causes versus “third-person perspectives” where the scholar describes and studies groups and individuals doing social justice work without being directly involved with it (Frey & Carragee, 2007). Critical media scholarship has been influenced by many different bodies of scholarship including feminist, critical race, Marxism, queer, postmodernist, and poststructural perspectives. Media literacy education with a social justice orientation challenges various intersecting systems of domination such as patriarchy, white supremacy, imperialism, colonization, ableism, heteronormativity, and capitalism.

While critical consciousness and a social justice orientation is essential to civic engagement using media, there are other factors that help to move beyond individual ethics to the realm of social responsibility, community orientation, and collective action. Mihailidis (2018) recognizes some limitations to current media literacy practices that constrain the civic potential of media literacy. They suggest that media literacies have to prioritize a civic intentionality and recommend five constructs: *agency*, *caring*, *critical consciousness*, *persistence*, and *emancipation* that concentrate in civic renewal and develop media literacy pedagogies that encourage citizens to support everyday activism. In this model, *agency* enables people to have an overall assessment of their social position and a constant self-reflection on the power and authority they have individually or collectively. In their opinion, civic media literacies also encourage people to *care for* one another. Mihailidis (2018) argues: “media literacies that embrace caring ethics establish the need to focus on bringing communities

together in receptivity, relatedness, and where we care for and care with. Civic media literacies, in this sense, support relation, interdependence, and engrossment, and do not dictate the grounds upon which they emerge” (p.161). *Critical consciousness* is another dimension in this framework that refers to developing a capability in citizens that leads to the “possibility of response” in the real life. Civic media literacies embrace transgression and all of the competencies in media literacy such as analysis, evaluation, production, reflection and action try to undermine institutional authority and challenge systemic power. *Persistence* as another aspect develops “stamina in young people to persist in their media pursuits” (p.162). *Emancipation* as the last factor in this model refers to this idea that civic media literate people are able to challenge the power and existing authority that limit them in their pursuit. This framework is helpful as we re-envision media literacy through the lens of social justice because it incorporates aspects such as an ethics of care, emancipation, and persistence, which are not competencies that are typically included in media literacy education.

What Now? The Future of Media Literacy in the Context of Social Justice and Civic Engagement

Below, we outline some specific recommendations as we move towards, as we reframe and reposition it within the larger context of the digital ecosystem of spreadability but also in this new emerging socio-political context of the re-emergence of political partisanship, right-wing authoritarianism, online hate, fake news, and delegitimization of journalists and media as a whole. In order to work toward media literacy that is explicitly oriented towards emancipation, anti-oppression, social justice, and civic engagement, we need to re-envisioning media literacy pedagogy, practice, research, and scholarship.

Digital media are public goods that serve community members. The market-based logic of neoliberal capitalism has led to broadcast reregulation, which have lead to lesser content and source diversity. An important aspect of social justice in media contexts continues to be media access and participation, which are tied to media industries and monopolization by a handful of corporations. If we have to incorporate social justice and civic engagement within media literacy, we have to continue to advocate for greater access to media in affordable ways to the public.

Going beyond individual level of emphasizing the role of media literacy as a tool for self-actualization and self-expression, we believe that media literacy education should move towards teaching individual learners what it means to an active engaged citizen who uses the tools of digital media literacy for furthering community goals.

Simply encouraging the creation of online communities and participation is not sufficient. Collaboration and community-building should be tied clearly with a critical emancipatory approach that incorporates social justice and anti-oppression pedagogy. Otherwise, the participatory power of spreadable media culture could reinforce rather than challenge social inequalities. This social justice orientation will have to use participation, engagement, and community-building to lead to social transformation in ways that lead to decreased power imbalances and greater equity.

From a critical pedagogy perspective, it is crucial that the learning space itself is not hierarchical but allows for collaboration, co-learning, and critical assessment. It is crucial, then that beyond examining media's role in our societies, media literacy education should prepare learners to be active digital citizens who are agents of transformative socio-political change.

An essential aspect of media literacy education has to be diversity literacy that teaches learners about difference, power, bias, and privilege. Media literacy itself has to be culturally-inclusive and sensitive to the socio-cultural contexts in which it is situated. Diversity literacy is not just essential to understand who we are as individuals within a larger social context but also to understand how to build coalitions across diverse groups in furthering social justice goals. It is important to recognizing Eurocentric White hegemonic aspects of literacy studies, including media literacy. Currently it continues to be rooted in ideas of digital democracy and participatory culture, which might be centered in Western notions of individualism, neoliberal capitalism, and colonialism, which need to be re-examined and dismantled.

In order to further media literacy through the lens of social justice and civic engagement, we would also need greater institutional and disciplinary support for media literacy research and activist/engaged scholarship. It might also be beneficial to have a network of hyperlocal, ethnically inclusive, and alternative citizens' media that could help amplify efforts to bring light to social issues. Such networks could also provide support for leadership training, micro-financing, organizing, and mentoring.

In adapting and repositioning media literacy education for social justice in the digital hypermedia landscape, we should be open to taking multi-method, multi-perspectival approaches to tackling difficult social issues. This could mean learning about critical big data analysis, data visualization, data curation, and meme analysis, which might not be considered traditional media research or methods.

We need to make a concerted effort to incorporate social justice into media literacy from all perspectives such as pedagogy, research, and community involvement. That requires educators, activists, community leaders, scholars, and administrators to commit to being

proactive in their approach by providing the required tools and competencies instead of as a reactive response to crises. It also requires coordinated organizational efforts and coalition-building across various media literacy organizations and networks, which are sometimes diffused, distinct, and even divided.

In conclusion, as engaged global citizens, there are crucial social inequalities that continue to remain challenges that need to be overcome. Forced migrations, human trafficking, mass incarceration, wage gap, climate change, natural disasters, food insecurity, unequal access to basic rights such as education and healthcare, and increased hate crimes on religious minorities, people of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals. Although this description presents us with a bleak picture of the future of the world, the hope that keeps us grounded in our work as educators and scholars is that community members from various backgrounds are also coming together in powerful ways to collaborate, organize, protest, and challenge social inequalities. Media are important venues that can facilitate, foster, and strengthen these efforts towards community building, participatory democracy, and social justice initiatives. Through intentional and persistent efforts to reposition media literacy as anti-oppression pedagogy that uses critical approaches to civic engagement for social change, we can make media literacy scholarship more meaningful, relevant, transformative, and even healing within a larger global context of hate, bigotry, inequalities, and injustices.

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