

Democracy & Education

Media Literacy as an Internal and External Process.

A Response to *Red States, Blue States, and Media Literacy:*

Political Context and Media Literacy

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Abstract

Curry and Cherner's article, "Red States, Blue States, and Media Literacy: Political Context and Media Literacy," discusses preservice teachers' perspectives of teaching media literacy skills in politically opposite "Red" and "Blue" States. In this response, I argue the inclusion of additional demographic information about participants might open up new avenues for which to analyze the data. I also address how the article theoretically takes up media literacy as well what other definitions exist, with suggestions for how the term might be expanded to include internal (self-reflective) and external (outside sources) processes for students and educators to consider.

This article is in response to

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Introduction

IN THEIR ARTICLE "Red States, Blue States, and Media Literacy: Political Context and Media Literacy," Curry and Cherner (2019) examine social studies preservice teachers' views of what it means to teach media literacy skills in two politically opposite states. I applaud the authors' choice to look at media literacy from this angle, as the literature can often focus on *what* students should learn or what they *have* learned from an intervention. It is equally important to understand the environments where learning occurs and how the teachers who instruct students perceive these environments, especially when it comes to their freedom to teach controversial topics and skills. However, even with strong arguments made throughout the article, certain demographic elements around participants could have been used to further flesh out the study, and media literacy as a theoretical concept could be revisited too.

"Voices Heard"—Demographics

The "red" and "blue" status of the selected states for this article was based on the county and state demographics from 2018, along with the results from the 2016 presidential election. The "Blue State" county, termed by authors as MPU, had a considerably higher percentage of votes (73.3%) for Hillary Clinton than the percentage for the state as a whole (51.7%). The "Red State" county, which the authors called SCU, had a higher percentage of votes (67.3%) for Donald Trump than its state had as a whole (54.9%). Both the MPU

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and SCU counties have a high non-Hispanic White population (76.5% for MPU and 82.6% for SCU), yet the non-Hispanic White population for the MPU state is 87.1% while the non-Hispanic White population for the SCU state is 68.5%. Thus, the Blue State is racially and ethnically less diverse than the Red State, yet the counties within those states are somewhat the reverse.

The authors acknowledge the relative political and racial homogeneity of their selected locations. They recruited participants from schools of education at colleges in these counties, which were “the populations available to them in their own institutions as a convenience sample” (Curry & Cherner, 2019 p. 7), a frequently employed tactic in research. The authors could have situated their counties and schools within the broader educational patterns of their states. For example, it would have been helpful to know if there are counties with demographics that do more closely mirror each of the state’s demographics and how many there are. Conversely, it would have been helpful to know if most or all education schools in the two states *are* in counties similar to the ones chosen for this study, which would have highlighted imbalances that exist in what type of populations have *access* to educational opportunities and where those opportunities (specifically educational institutions) are located. If the SCU’s state trains future teachers in predominantly White areas, what are the implications for aspiring educators of color and students of color in racially and ethnically diverse areas? Again, none of this takes away from the study, but rather the benefit of such a discussion in the limitations would allow readers to imagine alternatives for the types of research potentially conducted on teachers, or to identify gaps and new, future research directions.

Proponents of media literacy education have argued that media is a *construction* with a point of view (Center for Media Literacy, 2009; Considine & Haley, 1999; Hobbs & Frost, 2003). Students must be able to recognize and sometimes challenge the implicit and explicit messages contained in works, but they should also have an awareness of *who* gets a point of view in the first place, *whose* perspective is highlighted and reproduced for audience consumption (Metzger, 2010). This issue of point of view applies to academic research too. How might the data have looked different if the counties had been more heterogeneous in a combination of ways? This question doesn’t mean the authors needed to offer any hypothetical, “what if” conclusions about how the data might have looked with a different demographic but rather to highlight that this is a limitation of the study. There are pros and cons to any sample, but it is important that researchers today grapple with and explain the potential losses or gains had by location and subsequent demographic selection, as well as whose voices are excluded or included and why.

Tied to county demographics are the preservice teacher demographics themselves. All 13 preservice teachers in the SCU sample are White. Only one out of eight in the MPU sample is a person of color. This reflects a broader issue of a lack of diversity among teachers generally in the United States (Busey & Waters, 2016; Haddix, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016), so the pool from which the authors drew was likely not diverse from the start, especially in racial and ethnic makeup. However, as

previously mentioned, limitations around demographics when it comes to this type of research should be discussed, as should what a lack of wider diversity among teachers creates for whose voices and perspectives are represented and *who* is teaching to an increasingly diverse set of students. Even with the limitations of preservice teacher options as a whole, inclusion of demographics from each of the education schools where participants were recruited might have been helpful. If there were only a few or no preservice, teachers of color enrolled in the programs overall, or a majority of White preservice teachers were the only ones who agreed to participate, that’s fine, but it’s the lack of clarity on how much or little diversity there was within these particular schools that’s somewhat problematic.

When avenues are not provided (or acknowledged) for the voices of racially and ethnically diverse participants to be heard, especially around media literacy, that has profound implications for future directions in research and implementation in the classroom, as curricula and policy changes may not take into consideration the range of experiences and perspectives that can be unique to different groups. The gender makeup of the sample isn’t integrated into the analysis of the study either. For the Red State SCU preservice teachers, 10 out of the 13 are male, whereas 5 out of 8 Blue State MPU teachers are female. This could have been another interesting dimension upon which to approach the data, looking at the intersections of gender, race/ethnicity, and politics.

Political Ideology and Visibility

I appreciate the authors’ rationale for why they didn’t ask participants about their “political ideology, sexuality, or other identifying information,” as they sought to “increase the participants’ comfort level with the study and for them not to potentially feel ‘outed’ [sic]” (Curry & Cherner, 2019, p. 6) by participation. While the choice is understandable for perhaps sexuality and other identifying information, the exclusion of political ideology is less clear. Given the homogenous nature of the counties, it is reasonable that preservice teachers in the MPU and SCU locations may not wish to disclose their political ideology if it diverges from the majority in the area, but analysis of the data by this dimension might have led to the emergence of new patterns or points of interest. It might have been worthwhile to know whether preservice teachers’ perceptions around media literacy deviated from their peers within the same county based on their own political leanings, especially if those leanings were the opposite of their blue or red locations.

In one of the excerpted quotes from a preservice teacher in the study, an MPU participant mentions they grew up in a more conservative environment and thus could relate to students from that background. Does that participant still lean conservative? How might it have influenced how they taught, what they taught, or their perceptions of what was acceptable in the county? How might the political ideology of the one person of color participant have intersected with their race and gender and affected their individual comfort level to teach media literacy in their environment? I grant that fear of exposure due to participation was likely a very real factor.

Other external considerations such as IRB restrictions or that nonpolitical identification may have been a condition for participants agreeing to be in the study might also have been a factor. Again, it would have been helpful to discuss this in the rationale for their methods. A future direction of this line of research might be to conduct a study in more heterogeneous locations where this is less of an issue.

Media Literacy Framework Considerations

The National Association for Media Literacy Education's (NAMLE) 2007 definition of media literacy, "the ability to ACCESS, ANALYZE, EVALUATE, CREATE, and ACT using all forms of communication" (NAMLE, 2007, para 1), served as a baseline for how Curry and Cherner's (2019) study thought about media literacy. Other definitions of media literacy exist (c.f. Center for Media Literacy, 2009; Considine & Haley, 1999; Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016; Guthrie, 2019; Hobbs & Frost, 2003; Kellner & Share, 2007). The authors' definition selection is a solid choice, but similar to what I ask about the methodology, why this definition over others? What benefit does the NAMLE definition have for the purpose of this study, as opposed to another option? It would have been nice to situate the NAMLE definition in the broader media literacy literature.

Curry and Cherner (2019) also discuss the need for students to become "active authors of social media messages" that they can use "for self-expression and advocacy" (p. 2). A possible missing element here to flesh out a framework for media literacy is for students to be aware of how their *own* biases and points of view affect their understanding of media messages, as much as they need to be aware of the biases and points of view built into the media they consume. This self-reflective component of media literacy is absent not only from the article's framework, but from the survey offered to preservice teachers in the study, which included 12 media literacy skills that the teachers had to rank in importance on a four-point scale. Items focused on the interpretation and evaluation of sources, research skills, content creation, dissemination of information via social media, and awareness of behavior problems. Yet to be media literate should include a metacognitive process, for students to think about the why they evaluate, interpret, behave, and think what they do and to understand and articulate that their created content has a point of view and message too.

Curry and Cherner (2019) do note that critical media literacy is useful not only for analyzing media messages, popular culture, and information broadly but for addressing politics and fake news, which is essential in today's society, as people tend to process news and other information into their existing schemas—whatever knowledge, stereotypes, and associations they have about other people and issues. Schemas evolve over time, but personal biases and backgrounds affect how individuals understand and remember information (Anderson & Pearson, 1984; Bartlett, 1932; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). The authors discuss that confirmation bias—the easier acceptance of information that aligns and validates one's prior beliefs—is in relation to "motivated reasoning," which they describe as when "decision-making processes are

'motivated' by outside influences (including social group identifications and political affiliations) rather than by rational thought" (Curry & Cherner, 2019, p. 3). A question arises about whether any type of reasoning is ever not motivated by "outside influences" to some degree, for even if we do internally process information uniquely based on our individual backgrounds and experiences, the points of view we develop is still the result of our interactions with external forces throughout our lives. Media literacy could have therefore been explored as a more bidirectional process whereby media shapes people, but people also shape media in turn (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009; Van Dijck, 2013).

That "rational thought" can somehow be divorced or is distinct from the outside influences of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias seems rather nebulous, and the idea could set a problematic precedent in teaching media literacy to students. People tend to recognize bias in others more readily than they do in themselves (Frantz, 2006; Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004; Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002; West, Meserve, & Stanovich, 2012). There is evidence that cognitive ability does not always correlate with the level of bias exhibited by individuals (Stanovich & West, 2008; Stanovich, West, & Toplak, 2013; Toplak & Stanovich, 2003), though more education may have some positive impact (Perkins, 1985; Toplak & Stanovich, 2003).

Data and Analysis

Data for this study included surveys administered to the teachers, analysis of their lesson plans, and focus group interviews of a small subset of the participants. Both authors analyzed the lesson plans from both sites, which they used to develop the protocol for their focus group interviews. Yet only one of the authors worked in each site, which like the demographics, has implications for the study. What might have been different if the researchers had worked in the reverse county or if both had gone to the two locations together? This question isn't a critique per se, but merely to highlight that in any research, the person behind the data collection is as influential to the construction of a study as the voices of the participants who generate the data. Point of view occurs at multiple levels and in multiple ways, even when there is a consensus on methods. This is sometimes an unavoidable aspect of research when there are teams involved, and it in no way takes away from the study. Still, researchers' positionality and their individual point of view—and how that shapes the questions asked, data collected, and responses received—aren't always acknowledged when they should be.

The interview protocol emerged from content in the teachers' lesson plans, which was a nice building off data by the authors. Curiously, only 4 out of the 13 participants in the SCU sample were the focus group, while 3 out of the 8 MPU participants were interviewed. As with the recruitment of the preservice teachers in relation to the demographics of the school and counties, it is unclear whether the number of interviewees was deliberate or due to who was willing to participate. The authors don't specify which preservice teachers were part of the interviews, and it would be further useful to understand the rationale for conducting focus groups instead of one-on-one interviews given the small N, especially as the authors had made a point about wanting to

maintain participants' privacy and not "out" anyone. Different, although not necessarily better, types of data might have been generated had the participants not been in the presence of their peers. The authors acknowledge participants might have been "influenced by the first participant to answer a question" (Curry & Cherner, 2019 p. 7), but interviewees also might have spoken less candidly as a whole in a group than in one-on-one interviews. The small sample size is noted to be a limitation of the study, but the size in itself is not as limiting as the lack of details about the selection process for the sample, as mentioned previously.

Results from the Study

For the survey, the MPU preservice teachers ranked interpretation and media effects on behavior as the most important media literacy skills to teach, while the SCU teachers ranked content creation, awareness of antisocial media behavior, and use of media literacy strategies as among the most important. MPU preservice teachers ranked awareness of antisocial media behavior and the use of literacy strategies as of middle importance. Yet the authors note "there are more similarities than differences" (Curry & Cherner, 2019, p. 8) between the Red and Blue preservice teachers in that both sets of participants desire to teach media literacy and perceive the cultivation of skills as important generally, though direct comparisons between the two groups can be tricky. While the Ns of the MPU and SCU teachers are small, the SCU sample is technically a little over 60% larger than the MPU sample.

A finding from the focus group interviews is that two SCU preservice teachers thought it was "controversial" to teach students to research and disseminate research via media outlets, as well as to teach students to create social media campaigns around an issue. In contrast, MPU preservice teachers didn't find research and the sharing of research through media as controversial, but two MPU teachers did see teaching students to create a social media campaign as controversial like the SCU teachers. Another iteration of this study could involve asking teachers to expound upon and provide additional details (perhaps even engage in a metacognitive exercise) on why they find certain elements controversial or not, what in their own backgrounds might have led to agreement or disagreement for certain skills to be controversial. The authors claim "elements of media literacy were more clearly controversial to Red State SSPSTs [social studies preservice teachers] for one simple reason: Media literacy was often equated with expressing one's political opinion, which was viewed as inherently controversial" (Curry & Cherner, 2019, p. 10). I'm not sure the data in this study as currently presented supports that assertion or that the reason is "clear," especially without more demographic and background information on participants, including their political ideologies.

I am also unsure teachers' reasons are entirely dependent on their external environments, which is interesting given the earlier discussion in the article about motivated reasoning and outside influences. While I believe the external, political environments of the MPU and SCU counties do influence teachers' perspectives, political ideology, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, educational experiences, and other factors contribute too. For instance, most of

the preservice teachers had bachelor's degrees in history, but a few had communications, psychology, politics, and interdisciplinary degrees. An exploration of how the preservice teachers' undergraduate majors might have influenced their orientation toward media literacy could be part of future directions. Similar to media shaping us and being shaped by us, preservice teachers' beliefs about media literacy in the classroom are likely the result of internal and external forces that play off one another.

A fear of parents was one of the stated reasons for preservice teachers' hesitation in the teaching of certain media literacy skills, but it was striking that their fear typically derived from other teachers' warnings and stories and not from firsthand experience. This begs the question of whether these fears are unfounded, even as stories continue to be passed on (particularly since the preservice teachers often declared they would teach the media literacy skills to students anyway), or if there is a genuine basis in reality for fear at these schools. Regardless, the power of social networks and word-of-mouth warnings when it comes to teachers' perceptions of academic freedom is a great point, as is the takeaway that many of the fears preservice teachers have about media literacy are from other teachers telling them what to fear.

Conclusion

We live in an age of increasing ideological polarity and greater intolerance for oppositional views (Dettrey & Campbell, 2013; Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014; Taylor, 2016). Today's complex media landscape allows for exposure to diverse perspectives, yet customization, choice, and the sheer volume of options can result in the ability to connect with and only follow likeminded content, whereby users become more polarized in their views than less so (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015; Conover et al., 2011; Gruzd & Roy, 2014; Stroud, 2008). It is in this climate that proponents of media literacy education stress its importance. Students must be able to recognize and challenge the implicit and explicit messages contained in works, especially as these messages can have widespread effects on a society (Kellner & Share, 2007) and form part of "the complex relationships among audiences, information, entertainment, power, and ideology" (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016 p. 4). Students also need to be self-reflective about the media they potentially consume and produce.

I agree with Curry and Cherner (2019) about the need to ensure as much flexibility as possible for teachers in how they can incorporate media literacy content into their lesson plans so they're able to work within a variety of educational environments. This includes the suggestion of *implicitly* adding media literacy as a dimension of promoted, traditional content standards for schools and environments that are not necessarily open to media literacy explicitly. I appreciate that the authors provide actual resources that teachers can use as guides to address biases and teach critical-thinking skills around media, listing websites such as the News Literacy Project, News Guard, The Stanford History Education Group, and Facing History and Ourselves. Moreover, Curry and Cherner do a good job of explaining how they adapted Banks's Approaches for the Integration of Multicultural Content into their

Levels of Integration of Media Literacy Content, which can serve as a foundation for how to think further about how media literacy is utilized in the classroom. While some issues around demographics in particular could be more fully interrogated in the article, “Red States, Blue States, and Media Literacy: Political Context and Media Literacy” as it stands provokes a number of thoughtful questions and ideas that can extend the literature on media literacy and be relevant to researchers across disciplines.

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