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The Neutrality Myth: Integrating Critical Media Literacy into the Introductory Communication Course

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Research Article

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Abstract

Our current cultural moment requires reflective urgency. COVID-19 has forced a collective pedagogical confrontation with new media's materiality, and how such materiality intersects with, for example, the public speaking traditions within introductory communication courses. While COVID-19 has spotlighted online-only educational conversations, our disciplinary need to refocus new media introductory course curricular practices pre-dates the pandemic. This essay extends Rhonda Hammer's (2009) critical media literacy framework into the introductory course, a practice whereby students are empowered to "read, critique, and produce media" rather than be passive consumers. We explore critical media literacy as pedagogically fruitful in identifying and resisting dominant ideologies that sustain inequalities through new media, focusing on information, power, and audience as core pedagogical principles that can re-shape introductory content and teaching.

Keywords: Critical media literacy, critical pedagogy, new media, information literacy, praxis

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Introduction

Our current cultural moment requires reflective urgency. COVID-19 has forced a collective pedagogical confrontation with new media's materiality, and how such materiality intersects with, for example, the public speaking traditions within introductory communication courses. Emergent in the spring 2020 semester, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted "business-as-usual" university protocol, requiring massive curricular restructuring and proctoring across the United States. In response, universities shifted to remote education, including thousands of introductory communication courses, leading to a phenomenon that Schwartzman (2020) calls "pandemic pedagogy" where communication teachers negotiated synchronicity, undergraduate engagement, and accessibility. Such swift action has, as Latham & Braun (2020) argue, "laid bare long-standing shortcomings in both higher ed's value proposition and the means to deliver it," where, previously, "[remote] education was more the exception than the rule" (para. 1). And, as universities and pedagogues attempt to negotiate the new normal in a "post-pandemic" society, disciplines, including communication studies, must quickly negotiate new media as integral rather than additive to the student experience.

While COVID-19 has spotlighted online, remote, and distance-learning educational conversations, our disciplinary need to refocus new media curricular practices pre-dates the pandemic. Introductory communication course coordinators and instructors remain ill-equipped to integrate, evaluate, and produce new media. In 2016, for example, Gehrke challenged introductory courses to confront a pivotal shortcoming: the inclusion – or lack thereof—of digital oration into our curricula. Gehrke's (2016) argument is persuasive in asking us to consider structural changes or alterations to the very medium that constitute speeches, arguing that digital oration should be included in all public speaking classes given the significance that new media communication play in student lives. Or, as Atay & Fassett (2020) ask of communication scholars, how can new media be utilized as a new space for student message expression? Even when introductory courses attempt to integrate new media (Ramsey, 2017), including the use of social media (Oh & Owlett, 2017), a clearer focus on multiliteracies or media literacy are needed (Khadka et al., 2014; Ramsey, 2017). A media literacy focus is key because, as Rhonda Hammer (2006) contends, "since we are 'immersed from cradle to grave' in media culture, it is essential that we teach and continue to learn about the multidimensional, and complex nature of media production and critical cultural studies" (n.p.). We concur

and argue that critical media literacy provides a necessary framework to integrate into our introductory courses, privileging a critical engagement with media across our curriculum.

Integrating critical media literacy means placing Sprague's (1992) question at our pedagogical forefront: "Does our current approach to scholarship have a liberating or a dehumanizing effect on students and teachers?" (p. 5). Because media literacy is always a "project of radical democracy" concerned with developing "skills that will enhance democratization and civic participation" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 17), introductory communication courses—with a common focus on civic engagement— are prime locations to explore new media literacies in communication studies. Focusing on the introductory communication course, we engage Sprague's question by extending Rhonda Hammer's (2009) call to integrate critical media literacy, a practice where students are empowered to "read, critique, and produce media" (p. 170) rather than be passive consumers. Bergstrom et al. (2018) highlight the importance of this critical practice, noting that "media literacy education has been cited as instrumental in minimizing potential negative effects on audiences who are exposed to unrealistic media content" (p. 114). Introductory courses must evaluate how media messages influence message creation, presentation, audience analysis, communication ethics, and persuasion. We place Hammer's call in conversation with critical communication pedagogy (CCP) – a rich literature in communication studies that, as Fassett & Warren (2007) argue, paradigmatically shifts pedagogical focus by situating inquiry "in relation to larger, macro socio-cultural, socioeconomic structures" (p. 26). Supported in literature, Kellner & Share (2007) argue that critical media literacy is always already a multimodal project of critical pedagogy.

Using our experiences as critical communication pedagogues in the introductory communication course, we explore critical media literacy as pedagogically fruitful in identifying and resisting dominant ideologies that sustain mediated inequalities while acknowledging the value that media integration can play in our introductory communication education. Our goal is not to signal media as a replacement for other important introductory course content or frame media as always already positively situated; rather, we contend that a critical media literacy framework can bolster the pedagogical work being done in classes by acknowledging the role media continue to always already play within our introductory course content and in student experiences. We begin by outlining critical media literacy before offering three broad pedagogical principles – information, power, and audiences – that can assist introductory course instructors in integrating critical new media literacy. Borrowing

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from Kellner & Share (2007), we agree that critical media literacy "deepens the potential of literacy education to critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, information, and power" (p. 60). We wonder, how does our uncritical approach toward information and audiences ignore the role of power in how new media shapes public speaking contexts? How might a critical literacy framework offer counter-narratives around these concepts in ways that are both theoretically and practically useful for public speaking instructors and students?

Defining Critical Media Literacy

New media have permeated cultural landscapes, expanding the pedagogical scope beyond classrooms' physical boundaries, both in content and medium. By new media, we are referring to evolving media that are available through digital technology where consumer and producer are often blurred (*Communication in the real world,* 2013). In the case of social media, a popular new media tool, the Pew Research Center (2016) confirms that, on average, 7 in 10 U.S.-Americans use social media, with young adult use on the rise. While the social media landscape is vast, Facebook and Twitter are amongst the most widely recognized, resulting in the current student generation being constantly connected (Evans, 2014). Responsive to these changing contexts, teacher-scholars from vast interdisciplinary backgrounds have begun integrating new media into classroom curricular decision making, contending that new media may have pedagogical potential (Sobaih et al., 2016). Much of this scholarship focuses on the integration of social media tools or educational platforms held in digital spaces. For Evans (2014), for example, "social media tools facilitate media and information sharing, collaboration and participation" (p. 903). Blankenship (2011) goes one step further, noting that "interactive, community-focused online tools— like Skype, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, wikis, and the educational software Blackboard— are becoming so dominant in the classroom that it's hard to imagine any professor or student making it through a week without them" (p. 39). For Blankenship, new media access may increase student learning through greater engagement and creativity, making integration of such tools paramount.

The COVID-19 pandemic created opportunities to increase engagement with new media through practical urgency. For example, teachers used online forums like Facebook to post Ted Talks and educational technological tools to assist fellow instructors in swiftly updating their course content (see Schwartzman, 2020). Marachi & Quill (2020) note that "architecture [was] already in place to respond to the new

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learning environment created by the pandemic" (para. 7) including Zoom and learning management systems like Canvas. This engagement with new media may create pedagogical opportunities to think broadly about new media's potential in developing new teaching techniques. However, Marachi & Quill (2020) similarly warn that, while available, there are ample concerns around tech integration, including privacy and questions surrounding student data. Their insights remind of the complexity surrounding new media tools, integration, and urge us to ask nuanced questions about new media's intersection with technology and pedagogy.

Marachi & Quill (2020) demystify new media by reminding teachers that technological tools have simultaneous potential and barriers, and successful use of new media means understanding the complexity and differences that exist. In our experience (as an introductory course director and assistants), media are often additive, reduced to presentation aid integration, where new media are assumed to be a neutral medium. In response, instructors might use informative literacy frameworks to help students locate research and information through databases or online publications. In Morreale et al.'s (2016) broad meta-analysis of introductory courses, for example, "technology" is operationalized through online teaching, the integration of presentation aid, or the use of tech-ed tools like listservs. These are important, but they lack a critical focus that integrates conversations of students as media makers, and oft forego critical conversations about the constitutive nature of new media. Gehkre (2016), as described earlier, asks that we consider, holistically and heuristically, how critical media literacies challenge our pedagogical approaches to teaching. For example, are we relying on the belief that new media play no role, even while we utilize new media to deliver our content? Are we teaching a "business-as-usual" approach that a) may accept and encourage students to integrate media into speeches without b) being critical consumers about the messages, impacts, or narratives of those integrations?

Critical media literacy offers a framework to reconcile these questions. For Hammer (2006), critical media literacy functions dialectically, as both theory and practice. A theory–praxis approach allows constant interrogations of media's prevalence in students' lives, the assumptions about media participation, and practical ways for students to engage with media. We find Kellner and Share's (2007) extrapolation of critical media literacy a helpful framework:

> Critical media literacy is an educational response that expands the
> notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication,

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> popular culture, and new technologies. … Along with this
> mainstream analysis, alternative media production empowers students
> to create their own messages that can challenge media texts and
> narratives. (p. 60)

Kellner and Share's quotation is useful in recognizing the expansive use of media, the necessity to undergird critical thinking and thought to analyze such messages, and to remind students that they, too, can be alternative media producers, where communication technologies can be used as "tools for empowerment" (p. 62). Their operationalization of critical media literacy similarly highlights the centrality of communication by relying on communication models that suture communication of media messages to audiences and power.

In the case of the introductory course, active democratic participation remains an explicit goal of our curriculum, with civic engagement and citizenship as foundational concepts that undergird our disciplinary history. Upchurch (2014), arguing that introductory public speaking classes are the heart of our discipline, contends that "the skills of citizenship are the most important skills we can teach our students" (p. 25-6). To be ethically engaged citizenry; to teach students mechanisms to participate civically in communities—both local and global—requires deeper investigations of critical media engagement as consumers and producers of media messages. Critical media literacy becomes a necessary infrastructure – theoretically and practically – to expand and challenge our curricular history in teaching what constitutes "citizenry" and how students might utilize new media to participate in civic engagement.

Thus, critical media literacies are less a set of prescribed skills than a multidimensional approach to critical communication pedagogy. Kellner and Share (2007) note:

> A major challenge in developing critical media literacy, however,
> results from the fact that it is not a pedagogy in the traditional sense
> with firmly established principles, a canon of texts, and tried-and-true
> teaching procedures. It requires a democratic pedagogy, which
> involves teachers sharing power with students as they join together in
> the process of unveiling myths, challenging hegemony, and searching
> for methods of producing their own alternative media. (p. 64)

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Critical media literacy may best be understood as an approach to communication pedagogy that's resistant toward traditional models of education that posit students as passive. Students instead practice reflexivity, or "a process of continually questioning the assumptions and ideological underpinnings of our communication acts" (Mapes, 2020, forthcoming). Reflexivity asks that, as teachers, we don't take assumptions about media for granted, and we look internally at our own biases and values.

Hammer (2009) concurs, arguing that critical literacy resists the pacification of students through banking models of learning. Advocating for "a perspective that seeks to empower students by giving them abilities to read, critique, and produce media" (Hammer, 2007, p. 170), critical media literacies must be compulsory in supporting students through critical thinking. For example, we embed critical media literacy in our pedagogical practices by asking: How do students interpret media? How do they interpret mundane, mediated messages, new technologies, and access to globalized knowledge? How are these related to questions of power and privilege? How can students become critical collaborators of media? How do students utilize media for brainstorming and topic selection for public speeches? How are students presenting media as presentational proof of their perspectives? Through problem-posing as a metric of critical media literacy, we can engage with differing student needs as they intersect with curricular goals.

In summary, we view critical media literacy as an adaptable framework for instructors to adopt to their own classroom practices, with special attention to students as simultaneous actors and consumers in media production—productions enacted within and through power differentials. With this broad perspective in mind, we outline information, power, and audience as three pedagogical reference points that introductory course advocates can utilize when implementing critical media literacy. Central to public speaking curricula, we ask: how can critical media literacy deepen our understanding of information, power, and audiences in our introductory communication courses?

Pedagogical Reference Points: Information, Power, and Audiences

Practically, our new media landscape has forced introductory course coordinators to confront the intersection of new media, the medium of public speech presentation, and course content. In this section, we begin mapping how critical media literacies can inform our introductory communication courses, responding to the urgency felt by many introductory course advocates. Because public speaking

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occurs in a majority of introductory communication courses (Morreale et al., 2016), and because introductory courses are often operationalized through the inclusion of public speaking (Dance, 2002), we specifically engage with public speaking learning outcomes. As stated earlier, new media literacies require a theory-praxis dialectic, whereby strategies are continually couched in our classroom practices and reflexively tied to theoretically relevant conversations. In this section, we acknowledge the prevalence of new media as both extraordinary and mundane to student lives while interrogating how new media challenges introductory course assumptions about what constitutes a public speaking event, public speaking content, and audiencing practices. Our goal is "to understand more about this multi-leveled process and how deeply it is embedded in the media of everyday life" (Hammer, 2006, n.p.). We engage with key themes, assumptions, and structural considerations of our introductory course, asking: what is the current state of media literacy in our public speaking structure? How are these literacies accounted for in our curricula? We walk through three pedagogical principles: audience, power, and information, where these are "interpretive reference points from which educators frame their concerns, goals, and strategies" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 63). Rather than prescribed categories, we propose these reference points as suggestions for introductory course engagement.

Information

We begin broadly, using critical media literacy to engage with the *what* and *how* of introductory course information and content, where new media affects *what* content public speaking students are experiencing, and *how* that content is experienced, i.e. the mediums and new media tools. As we've argued above, new media can often function as additive, with the assumption that new media merely transmits neutral information for student consumption. A student might, for example, use a social media meme as a presentation aid to clarify a concept in their informative speech. An instructor might integrate a popular Ted Talk, assuming that the technological medium is the means to provide an exemplar to passive students meant to replicate the best practices present in the recording. These assumptions rest on banking models of education, where the medium is merely the transmission of pre-set information and students are passive consumers. Freire (2001) writes that:

> Implicit in the banking concept is the assumption of a dichotomy
> between human beings and the world: a person is merely in the

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world, not with the world or with others; the individual is a spectator, not re-creator. In this view the person is not a conscious being (corpo consciente); he or she is rather the possessor of a consciousness: an empty "mind" passively open to the reception of deposits of reality from the world outside. (p. 247)

While Freire envisions the banking-model through teacher-student relationships, we view this analogy as central to new media, where banking models suppose that students merely exist in a world of pre-determined new media content.

Critical media literacy, using problem-posing, means repositioning students as actively involved in creating meaning with and through new media content. This approach presupposes communication as constitutive rather than transactional, challenging introductory course texts to move beyond transactional models of public speaking that label communication as merely "a continuous flow of information" (Floyd, 2019, p. 6). Instead, CCP reminds that "language isn't simply representational" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 61); thus, *what* students consume functions as world-making. Critical media literacy allows instructors to connect the materiality of what students engage with through communication as constitutive. How do memes relate to their lives, for example? What type of world is pre-supposed in a visual aid? How are new media examples that are part of lecture or discussion representative (or not) of student values and beliefs? What TikTok accounts do students follow, and how do their follows, likes, or comments support certain beliefs, values, and attitudes? Put differently, the consumption of new media content becomes always already material because media are modes of communication that influence and constitute worldviews.

Information is not only constitutive but expansive. New media have expanded access to diverse types of information—students are accessing more information than ever. Such technologies have resulted in a content shift, with globalization allowing local citizens to access knowledge and expanding authorial/audience possibilities, meaning that individuals can use digital means to craft and share personal thoughts and arguments beyond their immediate geography. The current pandemic provides ample evidence of new media as a mechanism of globalized information sharing and consumption. In Italy, for example, citizens shared their personal experiences with the government lockdown. Lakritz (2020) describes how "a collective of artists in Milan called A THING BY posted a video to their YouTube channel featuring Italians speaking to their past selves about the

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coronavirus, and what they wish they'd known 10 days ago" (para. 2). As this example amplified, new media allow "individuals [to] connect interpersonally beyond situated geographies while also producing unedited arguments, making social media users both producers and recipients of globalized cultural knowledge(s)" (Mapes, 2016, p. 9). Media facilitates access to information and creates platforms for users to connect, disperse, and share their contributions globally. In sum, new media have expanded the *what:* where gathering information, research, or topic ideas can originate from international authors-writers.

However, accessing more information has also resulted in access to disinformation or fake news. In online settings, Renee Hobbs (2017) warns that emotionally manipulative digital content and misinformation are on the rise. For example, Hobbs writes that more than 1 million social media users shared a 2016 fake news story that the Pope endorsed then Republican candidate Donald Trump for president. Similarly, in their recent book, *Critical Media Literacy and Fake News in Post-Truth America*, Goering & Thomas (2018) describe a *New York Times* editorial where a journalist misreported information about food stamps, resulting in support for stereotypes that populations in poverty are lazy and unhealthy. Sadly, new media have become the prime medium to exacerbate false claims, particularly during the pandemic, with a 2020 study confirming that social media posts are rife with scientific inaccuracies (Christensen, 2020). Critical literacy skills, including reflexivity, are necessary for navigating the matrix of misinformation that students experience online. If instructors and students begin from the premise that content is constitutive, developing critical literacy means acknowledging that the consumption or dissemination of mis or disinformation has negative, world-making consequences. Practically, critical literacy supports students by providing analytic frameworks to both understand the impact of misinformation and sort through content.

This reconfiguration of information could assist introductory course teachers in re-configuring or examining public speaking curricular concepts. Credibility – or ethos – for example, has a foundational disciplinary history within the introductory communication course. Haskins (1989) connects ethos to communication ethics, with ethos defining the character or "goodness" of the speaker. In Lucas's (2019) *The Art of Public Speaking* textbook—listed as the highest-assigned text in our field (Morreale et al., 2016), ethos is described as necessary to build credibility for an audience and influences the audience's likelihood to listen to a speaker. The impact of new media on ethos—how it's altered what ethos constitutes—is completely absent from these materials. Such absence ignores how, for example, fake news and

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false information can alter speaker and audience understandings of credibility. Because media constitute individual understands of self and others, logically, media are central to student perceptions of credibility. There are introductory course opportunities to engage with ethos through new media, both to expand and explore how credibility becomes re-shaped through and within a globalized new media framework.

So far, we have argued that what information students access through new media is significant, and a critical media literacy framework means accepting information as both expansive and constitutive. The *how* also matters, because how content is delivered—the medium—is altered through new media. For example, in the opening sequence of Lucas's (2020) public speaking textbook, a popular Ted Talk is mentioned as an exemplar of the public speaking tradition (p. 2). The live Ted Talk audience is central to defining the experience as a public speaking event; however, there is no discussion of how the experience, for students, is altered by new media as the medium. Students who witness the Ted Talk online are not the "live" audience, and their experience of the speech surely differs from those who were present in-person. Thus, we commonly reduce new media to a neutral and natural method of delivering information without accounting for how new media alters the message or meaning for an asynchronous audience.

These beliefs are evident in research about online public speaking. Certainly, online public speaking classrooms alter the means of pedagogical engagement and require new media as foundational to course performance. However, introductory course research has attempted to compare the efficacy of online public speaking to face-to-face courses (see Marshall & Violanti, 2005) with little theorizing about how and why new media might and should change our understanding or definition of what public speaking is. Put differently, even when digital oration is present, have we attempted to simply super-impose a face-to-face public speaking curriculum onto new media, unacknowledging how media may require re-theorizing about a) what mediated public speaking means, and b) how to critically integrate and create mediated content online from a communication perspective? As a discipline, we must begin innovative conversations that analyze our current speech models and structures in relation to the current media culture and new media mediums.

Diverse new media or social media platforms—TikTok or YouTube—are key examples of how mediums influence content. Each platform has different genres and features that are available for both public speakers and audiences. Rather than, for example, ask students to merely use YouTube as a neutral tool to post an in-person

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public speech, public speaking instructors could acknowledge the culture around YouTube, including how differing communication norms provide opportunities or barriers for a digital public speaker. TikTok is an alternative new media tool, described as "its own language" (Klein, 2019, para. 7) that includes TikTok specific trends, time limits, and norms. In either example, the medium or tool certainly alters and challenges our understanding of a public speaking context or how information is experienced.

Power

Power is our second pedagogical principle. While information as constitutive and expansive reminds instructors of new media's materiality, power as a principle highlights the unequitable and oppressive potential of such worldmaking. New media does not just create neutral worldviews but can support an inequitable world. As Kellner & Share (2007) argue, "The critical component of media literacy must transform literacy education into an exploration of the role of language and communication to define relationships of power and domination" (p. 62). By centering power in media literacy frameworks, we ask, what assumptions within our public speaking curricula and teaching disempower and, alternatively, how can new media be repositioned as empowering for student speakers and listeners?

These questions are complex, as evidenced by the integration of new media learning tools and educational technologies—including LMS systems, publisher tools, or social media platforms—into our public speaking classrooms. For some, new media tools allow flexibility, innovation, and a student-centered approach (Dhawan, 2020). However, this "mix and stir" approach can be disempowering for two reasons: First, it often pre-supposes technically savvy students who are efficient in both accessing and interpreting differing new media tools. Requiring the integration of new media tools assumes that all students have the means of accessing such platforms, including the physical technology. Charleson (2014) criticizes this mythic tendency to map students as the "digital native" (p. 74), whereby instructors believe that new generations of students naturally and normally access and use new media. There is, however, little evidence to support this claim. In fact, while research shows that students may spend hours using new media sites, they are generally not analytic or critical users (Selwyn, 2009). There is danger in assuming that students have a natural ability to critically participate in new media and to normalize the assumption that all students have access to the physical technology required for

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engagement. While, yes, it may be important to expand what constitutes a public speaking situation by, for example, integrating digital oration and utilizing online platforms (Gehrke, 2016); however, literacy around those technological tools is also paramount.

Second, new media technologies can be disempowering when instructors use such platforms as a tool to control or obtain power over students. In other words, how are public speaking instructors using new media tools to increase teacher effectiveness or monitor students? As a reader, these goals may appear reasonable, but Fassett & Warren (2007) warn that this approach positions power as a skill set or tool used to obtain student compliance. Rather than fluid and complex, power is collapsed to a one-way method of manipulating an assumed disobedient or resistant student. In a synchronous online class, for example, instructors might ask, how can Zoom features be integrated mandatorily to monitor that student audience members are listening correctly? Instead, CCP positions power as complex, relational, and shared dialogically between instructor and student. Instead of monitoring, for example, power as fluid might acknowledge that audience members may be parents with school-aged children, and, for example, invite classroom dialogue around the opportunities or barriers to mandatory Zoom requirements for audience members.

Critical media literacy acknowledges that new media tools are social and powerful forces that implicate identity and can reify inequality. Because new media participation is material (or "real"), integrating new media into classrooms are also culturally constitutive and, as a result, may support or resist hegemonic assumptions about groups or identities. Mapes (2020) reminders that "subjects are rendered through the ideological subscription of meaning in communicative acts, so what rhetoric infers—explicitly or implicitly—about groups, cultures, or subjects matters" (forthcoming). In our Zoom example from above, this means that a student-parent is never not a parent while audiencing a speech through Zoom, and requiring that their video be on and their body be visible for the duration of all speeches implicates their parental identity. "You must be viewable or you lose points" attempts to privilege the student identity, and however understandable, implicitly devalues the intersectional identities that students are simultaneously navigating. Put simply: new media are social forces, and student-teacher engagement with new media constitutes identity and can reify power dynamics.

Given that new media functions as a social force, critical media literacy encourages that representations be analyzed through ideological critique (Kellner & Share, 2007). For example, ideological critique can ground introductory course

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speech critique assignments in the representational weight of gendered, racial, and classed mediated messages, acknowledging the ideological and material implication of continued representations of certain identity histories. Research has confirmed that critiques, formed in pedagogical contexts, minimized negative self-perceptions around, for example, body image for audiences exposed to media content with unrealistic images (Bergstrom et al., 2018). Critical media literacy may support students who exist in minoritized and privileged positionalities to understand how those experiences are constituted through and within media. For example, it's not uncommon for us to ask students to partake in media criticism by asking, "How does the speaker situate or represent race?" Ramsey (2017) provides an example of representation critique within the introductory course by "using advertising campaigns or political communication to discuss logical fallacies and emotional appeals" (p. 120). Thus, integrating new media texts into the classroom can support students in investigating the power dynamics at play, particularly around gender, race, nationality, ability, and sexuality (hooks, 1996), and applies those critical skills to student speech critiques.

Beyond consumption and critique, students can enact empowerment and/or disempowerment through new media participation. Hasinoff (2014) warns that we must be attentive to "how participation can reproduce power structures" (p. 272). While new media may create possibilities for public speakers, contributions may also reify hierarchical cultural assumptions, ethnocentrisms, or stereotypes. And, because media messages tend to depict minority groups in limited and inaccurate ways that impact viewers' attitudes (Hurley et al. 2015; Tukachinsky et al., 2015), power remains central to production. Conversely, just as messages can support dominant and normative messages that are disempowering, Keller & Share (2007) argue that new media can be empowering. They write:

> Media and information communication technology can be tools for empowerment when people who are most often marginalized or misrepresented in the mainstream media receive the opportunity to use these tools to tell their stories and express their concerns. For members of the dominant group, critical media literacy offers an opportunity to engage with the social realities that the majority of the world is experiencing. (p. 62)

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Public speaking curriculum is well suited to teach best practices around writing and embodiment that can assist in creating marginalized stories while simultaneously offering critical listening opportunities for dominant group members.

Hammer (2009) provides a practical example of integrating counter-narratives through a group media speech. Students, in groups, "produce counterhegemonic video . . . to assist them in recognizing and understanding dominant genre and ideological and technical production codes and to employ or subvert these in their productions of alternative media projects" (p. 176). Hammer focuses on popular media forms like commercial media or documentaries and invites the students to craft group media in response to, in spite of, and the spirit of these forms. Production is a key skillset that Hammer values because production is practiced media literacy and enactment. In the introductory course, how might production, from an interdisciplinary perspective, influence and update how delivery is taught for digital speeches?

In a similar vein, Charleson (2014) advocates for a 4-week blogging unit. Charleson explains:

> The students are asked to create a multimedia profile of a fellow student suitable for a blog or website. The aim of this module is to enable students to create their own blogs, and to develop appropriate communication skills through critical analyses of existing online content. … The ability to analyse the constructed nature of media representations is central to media literacy, and asking students to critique blogging practices and then design their own online profiles develops this important skill in a practical context. (p. 74)

Utilizing blogs or Wiki sites, for example, can allow students to both analyze and make purposeful decisions about their own content and form—in other words, students are responsible for what they say, the content, and how they utilize blogging technologies to create a visual argument, the form. These activities highlight that communication is at the heart of new media messages and a critical orientation foregrounds the constitutive nature of such reality—all informed through various power dynamics.

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Audiences

Our final pedagogical principle centers audiences because, as Kellner & Share (2007) remind, audiences are "active in the process of making meaning" (p. 62). This is salient for the introductory course, where "audience" plays a central role in how public speaking is operationalized, often as a discrete group of core listeners that are present for a live speech. After all, we teach that public speaking should "create messages appropriate to the audience, purpose, and context" (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018, p. 7-8), where the "known audience" is always "an identified group of listeners" who are "physically present or … watching and hearing the speech through teleconference or Skype" (Floyd, 2019, p. 6). When speakers utilize new media, however, audiences may be known or unknown, synchronous or asynchronous. As Mapes (2019) argues:

> New media have expanded the audience pool for public speaking. In traditional public speaking, the audience is often limited to those individuals who show up for the event—the audience is explicit or discrete. In online speaking, you may have a discrete or dispersed audience. (ch. 14)

How do introductory courses cope with mediated frameworks where a key construct – the audience – becomes re-configured? If new media creates dispersed audiences and students can access those audiences using mediated technologies, teaching critical media communication competencies seems pertinent. In this section, we will think through how critical media literacy expands or challenges how public speaking defines an audience as live and discrete.

First, audiences are no longer singularly synchronous. With the increased popularity of online, asynchronous courses and use of digitized mediums (like TikTok and YouTube) to communicate ideas, new media have been thrust into public speaking curricula, challenging foundational assumptions about the "live" framework for a speech. Traditionally, online or hybrid public speaking classes require an on-campus or synchronous speech delivery mechanism, but COVID-19 has reduced such opportunities. Even requirements for a student to provide their own live audience of family or peers during a speech recording remains unsafe in a global pandemic. An asynchronous audience, however, is uncomfortable for some who ask, "how can a person learn to speak effectively in public when they're not

actually *in public*?" (Wstonefield, 2016, para. 4, emphasis in original). This assumes, however, that new media exists outside of the public sphere, unrelated to culture or community-building. As our information principle outlined, though, new media constitutes worldviews and, we'd argue, expands notions of the public because students have opportunities to both audience and produce digital speeches from dispersed geographies. Student speeches, even asynchronously recorded, contribute to the public space and knowledge of the classroom or other public spheres if they are broadly shared.

New media also challenges the assumption that all audiences are discrete, or the known audience members who are present. The efficacy of a speech is traditionally judged by audience analysis, or the standard that the "topic is clearly connected to *this* specific audience" (Broeckelman-Post et al, 2019, p. 170, emphasis added), often defined as student peers. Public speakers who excel at their craft are able to construct persuasive arguments based on clear analyses of who will be present. But not all audiences are discrete. Instead, students might use social media platforms – Instagram, TikTok, YouTube—to engage with known and unknown dispersed audiences. A dispersed audience provides opportunities to re-theorize audience analysis. Even with a dispersed audience, the analysis and consideration of potential audience members still matter, and a speaker can consider values and beliefs of their target and/or ideal audience. Similarly, using critical media literacy and the previous principles of information and power means acknowledging that dispersed audiences are real, dispelling the "black hole myth" that individuals can post whatever, whenever, without implication. Just because an audience is not visible does not mean that those audiences aren't relevant or constituted in and through a public speech. Using reflexivity, instructors can challenge students to think about the values, norms, and beliefs that their rhetorical decisions assume about an ideal audience.

Rather than a disadvantage, we view asynchronous and dispersed audiences as opportunities for public speaking instructors. New media as a valid medium for public speaking—and audiences as reconfigured beyond their student peers— radically alters opportunities for civic engagement. We often hear, for example, that "I'll never be on a stage with a formal audience," where students narrate our curriculum as unrelated to their everyday goals and experiences. If audiences are available through posting on Instagram Live, TikTok, sharing an idea on YouTube, or leading a Zoom workshop, public speaking becomes far more expansive and related to their everyday media experiences. Critical media literacy places mediated communication at the forefront of students' lives and as a valid social force in

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meaning making. This similarly reminds students that not all audiences are given, but many are found. Through new media, students have opportunities to locate their own audiences and communities that could benefit from their message.

The inability to think about how new media shifts public speaking contexts runs the risk of framing our introductory course as outdated and lacking nuance because it does not ring true to student lives. Integrating and experimenting with new media—while utilize critical frameworks—can create theoretical and practical disciplinary breakthroughs. For example, we have experimented with a "YouTube channel" engagement in our introductory courses, where students are invited to perform a short introductory video for their own fantasy YouTube channel. They are asked to create a channel that embodies them as a person. "For example," the assignment states, "would you create a nail-art tutorial channel? A channel that creates DIY houseware? A channel that gives tips on catching Pokémon?" Prior to recording their YouTube submission, students watch a series of YouTube videos to analyze and critique the speaker performances, both from a general public speaking framework and as critical media viewers. Students first participate in critical media criticism, where criticism of media texts "illuminates, enabling us to see a work in a new way" (hooks, 1996, p. 5). "What are the normative expectations of the genre?" the assignment asks. "Who is empowered and disempowered by these norms?" "Who is the ideal or assumed audience?" Grounded in a public speaking approach, these questions are always already related to potential audiences, both assumed and un-assumed by the speaker's rhetoric. Based on their research, students craft messages aimed at their ideal audiences. Students then record their short introductions and upload them for the class to watch. They debrief by discussing strategies and barriers to digital oration from speaker and audience perspectives, couching that discussion in YouTube norms that emerge for their niche communities and how their rhetorical choices relate to values and beliefs for their target audience.

While it's beyond the scope of this essay to engage all core introductory course concepts, we invite readers to reflect on curricular assumptions embedded in their introductory courses by asking: how are media integrated but absent from critical discussions? Are "mix and stir" approaches privileged over critical engagement? How might students assist in theorizing how new media can shape our understanding of what constitutes public speaking? As these conversations unfold, it is imperative that we consider our lesson plans, activities, and assignments as opportunities for increased critical media literacy.

These suggestions are the tip of the media iceberg. Other suggested approaches to incorporating critical media may include: Twitter hashtag tracking, e-zines, live-tweeting speeches, and media collages. We live in an era where President Trump uses Twitter as public discourse, where the mainstream media faces high levels of scrutiny, and where students have access to information 24/7— all issues that commonly infiltrate our classrooms. We are hopeful that critical media literacy may provide a cursory push to address intersections of communication, public speaking, media, and power. Information, power, and audience are three broad pedagogical principles that can guide introductory course advocates' integration of critical media literacy skillsets.

Limitations

So far, we have been hopelessly optimistic about critical media literacy and Hammer's framework as a template for execution in the introductory course. However, there are potential limitations and barriers. First, privacy must remain at the forefront, especially when students are required to deploy social media tools that limit privacy setting. As teachers, we must acknowledge the role of privacy, especially when considering social media use. We're skeptical of asking students to publicly use their "real" social media accounts for classroom content. Being respectful of student privacy must remain a priority. This priority, though, needn't halt media integration; rather, it should inform our critical pedagogy, exposing students to how technologies may function and why privacy remains a core concern for new media users.

Second, access cannot be assumed to natural or universal. While some campuses may provide mandatory tablets for all students, no such standards are universal across universities. It's often easy to assume that all students have, for example, an iPhone or high-speed wireless access. We must be responsive and creative, asking, could critical media literacy integration be possible without benchmarking usage on an individual student level? These questions are paramount if assignments are adopted that require, in particular, media production and access to particular technologies.

Third, reflexivity is necessary to understand the corporate complexity of new media platforms. The use of certain platforms is political, and many platforms are fun by for-profit corporations. This means asking, for example, if students are comfortable signing up for a YouTube account or using their personal Twitter. Instructors could acknowledge the capitalist reality of new media technologies and discuss the implications of their use from a communication perspective. We would

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also suggest offering alternative assignments for students who are uncomfortable participating on certain platforms.

These few barriers function as reminders to be continuous in practiced reflexivity. It is not our goal to elevate critical media literacy as the end-all, be-all to the introductory course. Rather, we hope it functions as an entry point for introductory course advocates to consider how and under what circumstances our discipline must shift with media's terrain. We conclude this conversation below.

Concluding Thoughts

We commonly narrate the introductory course as the "front porch" of our discipline (Beebe, 2013, p. 3)—the curb appeal of communication studies where students can learn vital principles of human communication. But, like every house, sometimes the porch needs an update to adapt toward environmental changes because, as Hant (2010) notes, "Social activism today is also unquestionably dependent upon media interpretations" (p. 43). It's time to re-route the wiring to match the changing neighborhood because as introductory courses continue to remain university staples, we are working with hundreds of thousands of students—many of whom experience media culture daily. We, like Fassett and Warren (2008), find that "What the 'introductory course' needs—what our students need, what we need—is a connection between the content and pedagogy of our courses and the content and experiences of their (our) lives" (p. 2). How can we, a discipline that remains vested in our introductory course, use media to assist in facilitating a sense of purpose?

As a reader, you may be wondering why critical media literacy skillsets "belong" in the introductory course. After all, there are media classes where students can enroll. While true, our introductory courses are often allocated as front-line courses which students are required to take, making our curriculum foundational to the long-term student experience. Beyond the sheer number of students, however, it has been our goal to map the mutually beneficial and interdisciplinary potential of critical media literacy the introductory course. Communication is central to unpacking media as constitutive and influential and, as a core component of students' cultural experiences—both in and out of classrooms—our discipline can aid in expanding critical thinking around media use, consumption, and engagement. Finally, there is no time to wait. COVID-19 has mandated a disciplinary confrontation with media, and we are hopeful that this essay begins a broader dialogue about why and how critical media literacy can assist our ongoing transitions to digital pedagogy.

We end this essay in the spirit from which we began, with leadership from Hammer (2006), who writes of the necessity to account for the complexity of media. "it in this sense," she writes, "that teaching these kinds of courses can be—as bell hooks (1994) describes it—a transgressive process, and liberatory experience, for both teachers and students" (n.p.).

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