

# Media Literacy, Good Agency: If Jez We Could?<sup>1</sup>

By Julian McDougall



**Julian McDougall** is Professor in Media Education and Head of the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice at Bournemouth University, UK. He is editor of the Media Education Research Journal and the Journal of Media Practice and the author / editor of a range of books, chapters and articles in the fields of media education and media literacy. He runs a professional doctorate programme for teachers of creative arts and media.

[civic agency] [neoliberalism] [UK politics] [GAPMIL] [ethnography] [Brexit] [Zizek] [hegemony]

*There is nothing about neoliberalism that is deserving of our respect, and so in concert with a prefigurative politics of creation, my message is quite simply 'fuck it'. Fuck the hold that it has on our political imaginations. Fuck the violence it engenders. Fuck the inequality it extols as a virtue. Fuck the way it has ravaged the environment. Fuck the endless cycle of accumulation and the cult of growth..... Fuck the ever-intensifying move towards metrics and the failure to appreciate that not everything that counts can be counted. Fuck the desire for profit over the needs of community. Fuck absolutely everything neoliberalism stands for, and fuck the Trojan horse that it rode in on!* (Springer, 2016: 288)

**M**edia literacy and progressive politics are not the same thing. I do not believe that media education should necessarily see itself as political, despite my own politics being pretty clear—I am a member of Momentum, the grassroots wing of the Labour party in the UK, a ‘Corbynista.’ But the recent field of educational work on media literacy for civic engagement does rather force this issue, so in this piece I want to explore what media literacy for ‘good civic agency,’ by which I mean a progressive, liberal, egalitarian, profoundly anti-neoliberal, so essentially LEFT

WING project, would look like. To be clear, I am not suggesting that media education could or should do this, but equally I don’t accept the idea that media literacy and civic engagement are *necessarily* connected, but I’m going to think through here an agentic media literacy designed to *absolutely fuck neoliberalism*.

## Terms (and conditions)

- Media literacy—let’s go with the broad brush headlines from the new UNESCO declaration, that media (and information) literacy is concerned with *what citizens choose to do with or how they respond to information, media and technology in their desire to participate, self-actualize, exchange culture and be ethical*. (UNESCO, 2015)
- Agency—knowledge in action (from the editors of JML in framing this issue)
- Civic agency—making media literate choices when engaging with media or using media to join the conversation in the public sphere or the commons.
- The relationship between media literacy and ‘good’ civic agency—thus far, hard to say.

<sup>1</sup> In 2015, Jeremy Corbyn, a veteran backbench Labour Party ‘rebel,’ was persuaded to stand for leadership and won easily. This was, in part, the outcome of a successful social media campaign by the grassroots activist group Momentum, who coined the slogan ‘Jez We Can’ to echo Obama. <http://bzfd.it/2erQB0j>

- The relationship between media literacy, good agency and neoliberalism—must be oppositional.

## Media Literacy and Civic Action

Young people receiving media literacy education will, readers of JML will hope, be critical, creative, aware of more or less hegemonic corporate practices at work behind their social media activities, come to be reflexive about the mediated curation of their lives in third spaces, use media to change the world for the better, contribute to the global economy with their twenty-first century literacies and participate in a new digital public sphere. And their advanced new media literacy will keep them safe online. This, to say the least, far-reaching ambition is evident in the recent UNESCO declaration on Media and Information Literacy which, among many other objectives, calls upon those charged with enabling it to ‘enhance intercultural and interreligious dialogue, gender equality and a culture of peace and respect in the participative and democratic public sphere’ (UNESCO, 2015). And yet there is no pedagogic rationale for how this might all come about. If we had one, what would it look like?

In an interview for the *Media Education Research Journal* (<http://merj.info/>) about his important book on media literacy and the ‘emerging citizen’, (*Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen: Youth, Engagement and Participation in Digital Culture*, Peter Lang Pub Incorporated, 2014) Paul Mihailidis states this case:

*Citizens (now) have more voice, and more agency. They are not bound by borders for information or networks to disseminate news at a certain time and place. Digital culture has subverted how citizens debate, engage, and participate. However, how we teach and learn about citizenship is still grounded in civic structures and duties, and not in networks, connectivity, agency and participation. My book sets out, in essence, to show this disconnect and then argue for media literacy as the mandate for civic inclusion and democratic thought in digital culture. It's clear that we have the capacity and networks in place, we just don't have the learning and engagement contexts to match. (Herrero-Diz, 2015)*

Attending the Salzburg Academy on *Media Literacy and Global Change*, led by Paul, it struck me that a pretty consistent political agenda is at work, and appears to be signed up to, hearts and minds, by the facilitators and young people participating. For example, the 2016 event *challenged its participants to examine critically how the media shape public attitudes toward migration and how such a polarizing issue could be framed to support more civic-minded responses* (see MOVE, 2016). Civic-minded, in this sense, surely means something political, fostering resistance to ‘othering’ centre-right media discourse? The Salzburg forum seems like a kind of ‘third space’ (Gutierrez, 2008; Potter and McDougall, 2017) where people are saturated by rich civic media literacy activities, enabling funds of knowledge to translate into progressive and political action, but it isn’t a neutral space, the dynamics are charged with an unstated left-wing agency, a counter-script to neoliberalism (disclaimer—these are my words, not out of Salzburg). This is very hard to do in the second space (formal education) because in the classroom the external drivers for media literacy are framed by either deficit models (protectionist critical reading of ‘big media’) or neoliberal economic modalities (digital literacy skills for employment).

## Notes from a Small Island

As part of a comparative media literacy project with the *United Kingdom Literacy Association* (McDougall et al., 2015), we asked a group of Media students in

*And yet there is no pedagogic rationale for how this might all come about. If we had one, what would it look like?*

a sixth form college (pre-University, 16-19 years old) to undertake a creative task that 1) involved making something with an explicit agenda of civic participation, 2) putting it online and 3) attempting to engage an audience. Topics included the death penalty, the global water crisis, the cost of public transport for youth, feminism, teen female body image (twice), or the need for politics to be taught in schools and football (twice). One participant already had her own *Tumblr* but opted to set up a *Blogspot* in order to share

her short written post on the death penalty. Her feedback amounted to responses from three friends via *Whatsapp*. The one student to make a video claimed that she did not have the facility to upload it to the web: “I have no hosting sites to add my video onto as I do not have internet access on my laptop at home, I have took a video from my phone of the video I made on

*In the classroom the external drivers for media literacy are framed by either deficit models (protectionist critical reading of ‘big media’) or neoliberal economic modalities (digital literacy skills for employment).*

*movie maker on my laptop so I could attach it here for you.”* Her video about the water crisis comprised stills, captions and music and was reminiscent of charity appeals. A ‘Politics in school’ piece began and ended with a piece to camera about the creator’s own experience, framing a series of vox pops with fellow students which served to demonstrate their own ignorance of politics. At the time of writing, the video had impressive playback but no responses. Another video largely comprises shots of fashion and makeup in shops with voiceovers from different girls about their response to the body image expected of women. This participant did show that she had shared the link on her *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Tumblr* accounts, though; again, there was no evidence of any audience engagement. Overall, none of the participants made any attempt to engage an audience online beyond a small circle of friends either due to reluctance or inability.

This finding is in keeping with the recent longitudinal, ethnographic observations from *The Class* (Livingstone and Sefton-Green, 2016). Whilst the young people here are strongly networked and there are some overlaps between college and lifeworld connections, there remains a great deal of insulation between personal and educational networking and a significant absence of civic engagement with any ‘new public spaces’.

### **Brexit Stage Right**

How ‘youth voice’ is articulated in specific practices, and on whose terms, is complex, especially in the ‘micro-political’ social media age. On the ‘civic imperative,’ Jamal Edwards, ‘Youtube mogul’ and *Bite the Ballot*

campaigner in the UK, gets closer to the complexity of the socio-cultural framing of public sphere practices for young people—“*It’s a cultural shift, you’re trying to say to people, you’re a citizen before you’re a consumer.*”

Hoping to impact on this, our *Spirit of 13* project invited under 25s to make short films responding to Ken Loach’s documentary about the welfare state (<http://www.thespiritof45.com/>), to ‘give voice’ to their generation’s views on contemporary issues of social justice (see McDougall and Readman, 2015).

Eighteen months on, we re-connected with the participants to find out if they voted in the 2015 general election and to look for evidence of any broader ‘democratic engagement’ around the election fostered by their involvement. The participants revealed a degree of engagement in political/civic issues that they were able to relate to the *Spirit of 13* project, although they didn’t necessarily formalise this engagement in conventional terms. Only half the respondents voted but there was evidence of enthusiastic engagement with political issues via social media: “*Most of what fills my news feed is recommended articles and videos about political issues that my friends have ‘liked,’*” said one respondent. Another said, “*Social media helps me to understand what my peers think about a certain political issue. It’s also the fastest way to get hold of news (Twitter).*”

The reverse was true of traditional media, with most respondents suggesting that the press, TV and radio played a minor role, if any, in their media diets, which suggests that, for this generation, there is, at least, a correspondence between new technologies and political engagement.

Regarding the project itself, we elicited some clear statements about the relationship between filmmaking practice and political awareness: “*Gave me the framework to express already existing political ideas and provided the opportunity for a short discussion with younger students I wouldn’t have otherwise met to discuss social issues;*” “*Spirit of 13 opened my eyes to how much of everyday life is politics and how some of it is controlled;*” “*Making films is going from thought and theory to action in a way that resembles field research.*”

So *Spirit of 13* provided a stimulus for young people to explore stories and issues to promote reflection on the meanings of politics and social engagement but the conversion of such reflexive media literacy to di-

rect civic action—at the polling station—appears to have been slipped away.

Another year on, these are hard times indeed for ‘good civics’. The generation that media literacy educators want to reach is growing up with a proliferation of terrorist attacks on EU nations, the refugee crisis (and the confused European response to it) and commonplace xenophobia towards Islam, hostility to migrants, the increase in hate discourse across social media, the UK’s departure from the European Union and the horrible alliance of ‘year zero’ presidential candidate Trump and Brexit architect Nigel Farage.

*UKIP and your disgrace,  
Chopped heads on London streets,  
all you Zombies tweet tweet tweet*  
(Sleaford Mods, 2014).

The UNESCO *Global Alliance for Media and Information Literacy* recently convened in Latvia and responses from delegates, EU and European Commission representatives and the UNESCO rapporteur to these developments centred on the (laudable) view that MIL could be used as a safeguard against hate discourse. But it’s hard to see how UNESCO statements about the importance of addressing hate speech translate meaningfully for those members of society who are ‘information resistant’ (UNESCO’s term) and/or reluctant to engage in public debate—those in the margins but happily so. The proposition from some panelists that MIL could have prevented Brexit was, to a UK delegate, hard to swallow when we know that younger people, immersed in social media and largely oblivious to the ‘old school’ press rhetoric of fear and loathing (of the other) largely either voted to remain or were excluded from the referendum by age. Arguably, MIL and some broader geo-civic education for the over 50s is what we need!

So—the inconvenient truth is that being media literate has no necessary relation to ‘good agency’. We urgently need to challenge two problematic assumptions—(1) that media literacy has any necessary relationship with civic engagement or participation in the public sphere and then (2) that if engagement / participation do arise partly as an outcome of media literacy, that there will necessarily be a liberal, egalitarian, environmental or peace-promoting politics



manifested in such agency. Media literate people are often pretty right wing, can be extreme, at worst badly ‘radical’ or at best speak a neoliberal discourse.

How has the media literacy community allowed itself this complacency? An obvious example is the optimism around digital social networks set against the more complex interplay between the network as a counter-commodifying space of resistance (the Digital Commons, for example) and the hegemonic control of networks in the neoliberal market. Whilst perhaps it is still reasonable to say—as commentators did at the advent of ‘the online age’—that non-hierarchical arrangements on the internet are very different to capitalist impositions of control and enclosure, it is sobering to reflect at this time that the empire has

*So—the inconvenient truth is that being media literate has no necessary relation to ‘good agency.’*

struck back pretty well in profiting from “the dialectic between autonomy and exploitation” (Wittel, 2016: 59). However, some rich sites for conflict are presented in this dialectical space with radical opportunities in each for media literacy educators: the open source web; the ‘Free Culture’ movement; new publishing modes (and associated activism against the commodifying, metric hierarchy corporate practices of Academia and ResearchGate); the Digital Commons and alternative education movements.

Networks, in this taxonomy, are understood as ‘thought collectives,’ of which two are in clear opposition. On one side, the neoliberal hegemony, itself a network of ideology, reliant on a first-order accep-





tance of the market and second-order state policy of opening everything up to it—in Žižek's terms, the market as ideology ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavoj\\_Žižek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavoj_Žižek)). On the other side, the commons, a contribution economy, whereby we give to one another our progressive ideas and resources (in our context, for media literacy teaching) and accept that some give more than others (as opposed to a gift economy, which requires reciprocal exchange). The commons, for the second thought collective, is given priority over the market as a 'natural order':

*The network of the activist thought collective needs spaces to meet and to talk. It will be another challenge to make these gatherings possible. We need them regularly, we need them on a global scale and we need them to be funded. We also need these gatherings to be free from the usual constraints of academic conferences, which are designed not to foster but to hinder the free circulation of ideas.* (Wittel, 2016: 85)

In an optimistic presentation of research into American youth activism mobilized by network media, Jenkins (2016) offers a hopeful lens for seeing 'networked publics' as productively disruptive:

*These models push against the individuality of personalizing logics of neoliberalism. Networked publics depend on social connections among participants and often demand that we care about the plight of others.* (2016: 269)

However, many of the movements studied in the collection might be considered mile-wide, inch-deep in the sense of being short term 'crash-and-burn' impacts on the order of things, which returns to equilibrium having allowed sufficient resistance for the centre to hold. This resonates with the 2016 Momentum campaign around Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, most definitely charged with network capital, and the politics of which are seductive to us—"welcome to the mass movement of giving a toss about stuff"—but with an absence of powerful hybridity as the activist impulses of the Labour movement are increasingly decoupled from the parliamentary party.

This is a quite different form of hegemony to the co-option of networking practices by the political mainstream, however, which Jenkins observes in the US as no surprise, given "these new kinds of civic cultures are developing a new repertoire of mobilization tactics, communication practices and rhetorical genres." In this sense the (popular) cultural sphere is the transition point (from actor network theory, or the gateway, in Jenkins' terms) to the political / civic sphere—"by any media necessary."

### **Jez We Can Do Media Literacy?**

*Let's not make the mistake of confusing anti-rhetorical 'truth-telling' with actually telling the truth.* (Thompson, 2016: 2)

In that third space for media literacy, we might find a way of dealing with the 'parataxis' currently employed by Trump-Farage. Without, though, an explicitly political remit, media literacy will always hit against a neoliberal double bind. On the one hand, we teach theory but only assess the understanding of it, not the putting to work of it for progressive ends. This leads to Media students faithfully 'applying' Laura Mulvey's 'male-gaze' theory as a production technique, happily writing about how they objectified females in their music videos. On the other hand, if we merely 'give voice' for self-representation we often find young people re-articulating the 'divide-and-rule' parataxis we want to oppose. Consider this example from research into audience responses to an exploitative UK documentary about social security claimants, from the *Hard Times Today* project (Bennett and McDougall, 2016a):

“... you’ve got a family, get a job rudeboy, McDonald’s are hiring 24/7, you can clean toilets.” (Community film participant, Back2Back Films, 2014)

During his second leadership campaign, Jeremy Corbyn offered a set of values and a digital-democracy manifesto. Taking both together, he pledged full employment, security at work, an end to privatization of public services, environmental policies framed by social justice objectives, redistribution of wealth, foreign policy based on conflict resolution and human rights, an open knowledge library (free to all), digital platform co-operatives, a Digital Citizen Passport for access to health, welfare, education and housing, open-source licenses for all publicly-funded technology resources and—most prominent for our concerns here—a people’s charter of digital liberty rights and the fostering of popular participation in the democratic process. All of this would be financed by progressive taxation and is thus rendered seemingly unelectable. These pledges ever being government policy and the possibility of aligning them with the educational curriculum via the conduit of media literacy in the UK are pipe dreams, of course. But what if?

We concluded *After the Media* (*After the Media: Culture and Identity in the 21st Century* by Peter Bennett, Alex Kendall, Julian McDougall; Routledge) and started *Doing Text* (Bennett and McDougall, 2011, 2016b Auteur) with a set of questions for students to work with when trying to do media literacy for radical change. For those projects, the progressive outcomes are intended to be a greater reflexive and curational engagement with textual lifeworlds, political in the CCCS tradition—understanding popular culture as a site of struggle and resisting neoliberal agendas for canonical, protectionist and economic modalities for media literacy. In the latter project we were providing practical implementation of the themes of *After the Media* in a ‘third space’ notion of the extended classroom. But here, for this article, these framing questions are ‘Corbynised’ to make them work for this hypothetically direct left-wing counter-script, for ‘good agency.’ The original questions are followed here by the ‘neoliberal fucking,’ in italics:

What is a text? What is the difference between a text and an event? *How does the*

*status of a media text and reactions to it reproduce or challenge social hierarchies, exploitation and cultural alienation? How can this be different? What will you do about it to make change happen?*

How would you describe your textual experience? What does it look and sound and/or feel like? *How do media give you opportunities to connect, represent / be represented, develop as a person? What will you do to fight media power when they misrepresent and deny social justice?*

What different kinds of spaces and places are there for consuming and producing textual meaning? *How do these textual media spaces enable or obstruct equality, rights, plurality of representations, collective action? What will you do to create radical textual spaces?*

What does it mean to be a producer or consumer in these spaces and places? *Who has a voice through media? Who is in the margins? How open (to all) are these media spaces? How will you use media to increase plurality and fair representation for social justice?*

What different kinds of associations and affiliations do you make? Who with? What for? **How will these mediated associations translate into collective action to change things and challenge power?**

How do you understand the idea of authoring? *What is being creative? Who has access to these actions, who is denied? How can you work with new modes of media production to fight power structures?*

How do you represent yourself in different spaces and places? *How do these representations compare to mainstream media, how is social justice enabled or denied? How are women, LGBT, disabled people represented? What will you do to support fairer media representation of people across society?*

How might we need to re-think the traditional categories of learning: reading and writing, speaking and listening? *How have these categories previously stopped people from having a voice?* **How will YOUR thinking differently about literacy to include digital media lead to a redistribution of cultural capital?**

In a recent thesis on the decline of the neoliberal grand narrative in the wake of austerity, Brexit and Trump's candidacy, Martin Jacques observes:

*One of the reasons why the left has failed to emerge as the leader of the new mood of working-class disillusionment is that most social democratic parties became, in varying degrees, disciples of neoliberalism and uber-globalisation. (2016: 32)*

I would level the same charge at the media literacy movement. Media literacy is currently nothing necessarily to do with civic or political agency but has quite a lot to do with protectionist deficit models and subsequently unintended marginalization, reproducing hierarchies of cultural capital by associating literacy with 'enrichment' and signing up to corporate imperatives to develop '21st century skills' to fuel the uber-global economy, in Jacques' words. Personally, despite my writing here, I am still deeply skeptical about this (civic) agency project for media educators. Where it happens, it tends to be in third spaces, not in formal education. In those spaces there is usually

*I am still deeply skeptical about this (civic) agency project for media educators. Where it happens, it tends to be in third spaces, not in formal education.*

a political objective, whether stated or not. This political objective is usually left wing, whether the facilitators would be comfortable with the term or not. The outcomes tend to be a resistant energy towards neoliberal media representations and a counter-script to seemingly neutral functional versions of media literacy. Either way, if you're going to try, as UNESCO and GAPMIL and others—with good intentions—are, to make a connection between media literacy and civic

engagement for social justice, then 'go the whole hog.' To that end, in this piece I have put some cards on the table by way of articulating what a transparently radical, shamelessly left-wing, and in the UK context 'Corbynistic' media literacy for 'good agency' might look like if only *Jez we could!* ✱

*[With thanks to Ashley Woodfall]*

## REFERENCES

- Back2Back Films. Benefits Street: Back2Back Opinions. Birmingham 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUFdguSXw3I>
- Bennett, P, Kendall, A and McDougall, J (2011) *After the Media: Culture and Identity in the 21st Century*. London: Routledge.
- Bennett, P and McDougall, J (eds) (2016a) *Popular Culture and the Austerity Myth: Hard Times Today*. New York: Routledge.
- Bennett, P and McDougall, J (eds) (2016b) *Doing Text: Media After the Subject*. Leighton-Buzzard: Auteur.
- Gutierrez, K. (2008). Developing a sociocritical literacy in the third space. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43(2), 148–164
- Jacques, M (2016) 'The Death of Neoliberalism and the Crisis in Western Politics'. *The Observer*, 21.8.16 31–33.
- Jenkins, H (2016) (ed) *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Livingstone, S and Sefton-Green, J (2016) *The Class: Living and Learning in a Digital Age*. New York; New York University Press.
- McDougall, J, Berger R, Fraser, P and Zezulakova, M (2015) 'Media Literacy, Education & (Civic) Capability: A Transferable Methodology' in *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 7(1), 4–17:
- McDougall, J and Readman, M (2015) 'Mediating the civic imperative'. Jackson, D and Thorsen, E (eds) *UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign, Reflections from UK Academics*. 33–22. Bournemouth: CSJCC.
- Herrero-Diz, P (2015) Review of 'Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen: Youth, Engagement and Participation in Digital Culture' / interview with Paul Mihailidis. *Media Education Research Journal* 5.2: 112–114.
- Potter, J and McDougall, J (forthcoming, 2017) *Digital Media, Education and Culture: Theorising Third Space Literacy*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Salzburg Global Seminar (2016) MOVE <https://move.community/>
- Sleaford Mods *Tweet Tweet Tweet* Cologne: Harbinger 2014
- Springer, S (2016). 'Fuck Neoliberalism'. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 2016, 15(2): 285–292
- Thompson, M (2016) 'They've got away with words'. *The Guardian Review*, 27.8.16: 2–4
- Unesco (2016): Riga Recommendations on Media and Information Literacy in a Shifting Media and Information Landscape: [http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/riga\\_recommendations\\_on\\_media\\_and\\_information\\_literacy.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/riga_recommendations_on_media_and_information_literacy.pdf)
- Wittel, A (2016) *Digital Transitions*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing.