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Disparities between new media use and critical engagement

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Abstract

In the age of network economy and information society, almost all social, cultural, and educational issues spread rapidly across local and global spheres. More than ever before people—particularly the young—are influenced by the advent of information technologies. However, the future of the world depends on a generation barely acquainted with critical and intellectual traditions. The 21st century undergraduate university students rely heavily on the new media (e.g., social networking sites and virtual worlds) to communicate, and shape their worldviews. This tends to reduce their propensity towards critically analyzing and deconstructing social inequalities and/or other crucial contemporary issues. And indirectly, it reduces the local concerns into the generic global. In an environment saturated with branding, it is hard to get students to think outside the new-media-box. The emphasis is mainly on image rather than content and substance. Therefore, the projection of an idea figures more prominent than its delivery.

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1. Introduction

This work is based on my teaching experience at the American University in Dubai (AUD), United Arab Emirates, as well as numerous discussions with colleagues. Nowadays, most educational institutions use promotional materials to situate themselves as unique; AUD is no different. The fact that the university calls itself “American” is problematic. Its designated title attracts many parents and youth, projecting an American educational model and an automatic “promise of success.” One is led to believe that the educational curriculum is a carbon copy of the US model. While this model may open alternative avenues for the students who graduate under such a system, it is not necessarily bullet proof or sustainable. Particularly, since AUD is not founded on the same premise as other well-known American universities in the region with rigorous curricula and a reputation for scholarship, for example the American University in Cairo or the American University in Beirut.

AUD is a privately owned for-profit institution that is logistically located adjacent to Media City and Internet City—Dubai’s hub for corporate media outlets. Situated next to other for-profit organizations marks the problems that plagues 21st century higher education. In a round about way, educational culture at AUD has established an aura of branding and bargaining. Recently, an article (July 2010) in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and an episode (May 2010) on Public Broadcast System’s *Frontline*, critically explored the topic of for-profit higher education in the United States—not to far off from similar institutions in UAE that are either run by Westerners or western educated individuals. Both the Chronicle’s article and the PBS’s program explore for-profit educational institutions as problematic. They ask the question: “does a diploma mean an education?” They argue that the system creates a mediocre educational environment with graduates who are barely capable of critical thinking, creative engagement, or problem solving skills.

At AUD, one gets the impression that the vast majority of the students view education as a flashy commodity gained through bargains and networking, not necessarily as an educational experience through critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, or hard work to achieve knowledge and expand one's horizon. The feeling is that a degree should be obtained with least effort as possible. It is important to note that there are some hardworking and talented students and this is not to generalize across the board. It seems that the students are the ones that tend to form the way things should work at the university. Similar to a store that one shops for goods and may complain about the products, the students complain and bargain about the assignments and their grades. Most likely there are students with similar attitudes in other universities who feel that they are entitled to "good" grades. Such an attitude is reflected in the students' behavior at school since most of them refuse to read, have poor writing skills, fail to follow citation guidelines, and bargain about the course's requirements. Often, class discussions circulate around personal rather than informed opinions based on research or the assigned readings. Today, the system of branding and bargaining runs the world, thus students and institutions of higher education are not immune. However, neither the students nor AUD are to be blamed. Since the institution is partially supported by corporations, it is difficult to expect deviation from their culture and politics. The concern is how to instill the desire of reading, learning, writing, and exploring in the 21st century students.

2. Information Society

Unlike its predecessor, the industrial revolution and the information revolution, the information society (IS) is controversial and debatable. Besides that there is an overflow of information, there is very little consensus as to how to define IS. Webster (2006) identifies six ways of understanding information society. These are: technological innovation and diffusion, occupational change, economic value, information flows, expansion of symbols and signs, and theoretical knowledge (pp. 23, 29). From these, the last item is most relevant to critical thinking and/or engagement within the highly mediated learning spheres of the 21st century. Webster distinguishes these realms of understanding IS in order to argue that none of these actually can be single headedly used to identify the post-modern society as an information society. The following are brief descriptions regarding each of these realms.

Technology refers to the three waves of technological innovations: agricultural, industrial, and information (PC, CD-ROM, DVD, cable, satellite, to name a few) that have eventually allowed for the spread of information (Toffler, 1980 cited in Webster 2006). Citing Bell (1973) Webster discusses the "post-industrial society" to be the closest to IS; indicating that information is the raw material of non-manual-labour including the rise of service sector and mass higher education (pp. 24-25). In terms of economics, Webster argues that information industries (such as education, law, publishing, media, and computer) do not have direct effect on Gross National Product (GNP). There is not a direct link between GNP and information. Space is another way of discussing information flows with around-the-clock access to information. This access is regardless of location, distance, and/or time. This leads to wired society or electronic grid in order to conceptualize the cultural aspect of the IS. As such, an environment that is saturated by information and media and independent of time and space intimately derives the everyday life. As signs and symbols, images and sounds travel through cables, satellites, and virtual worlds to construct contemporary culture. On the other hand, the codification of theoretical knowledge is central to innovation and the advent of technology. Knowledge is constitutive of the way we live (Webster, 2006). The distinctions in understanding IS sheds light on the new ways that the capitalist industrialism organizes industrial and non-industrial societies through the use of information. However, the mere presence of information does not enables one to critically challenge the status quo.

By juxtaposing the quantity of information with that of its quality, Webster (2006) argues that, not only more information does not mean useful information, but also more information does not mean social change. What matters in the post-industrial information age is theoretical framework; in other words, how do people use their access to information, to what end, and what do they do with it. Thus in gagging information, the distinction between quantitative measures (i.e., information employee, tradable information, and information workers to name a few) as oppose to qualitative measures (primacy of theoretical knowledge) exposes the utility of information and/or knowledge as it pertains to critical engagement with issues marking contemporary era.

3. Case study

I have been teaching a course on Online Communities for the past two years (Fall 2009 and 2010). In this course we review the history of Internet (Web 1.0 and Web 2.0), and discuss its possibilities and limitations as applicable to the students' interests, particularly film industry, journalism, and media, as well as their present and future goals. Usually, students share their experience with new media and social networking sites prior to reading relevant articles, or engage with them through practical applications (e.g., YouTube, blogging). Since for most of the AUD students, English is their second language, I often require that while reading the students circle the words they do not understand in order to look up their meaning. Also, I ask them to underline the sections of the article that interests them and to write comments on the margins of the article in order to prepare themselves for the assigned papers. Often, the majority of the students claim that they forget to follow these instructions or write the paper. Only, a few students voice their opinion that they find these activities "useless." These attitudes are contributed to the market driven culture that produces individuals with short attention span and highly dependent on visual clues; also, deep reading is not part of the culture.

In order to get the students engaged with the course materials, I replaced the traditional reading and writing assignments with short articles online, video clips, and blog entries. While these alternations somewhat influenced their participation with the assignments, it did not drastically changed their engagement with the materials and/or topics. Those students who read and wrote previously, continued to partake with the course materials. In general, the students' response to blogging has been positive, for example "it is fun" and "we are doing something." Their response to the traditional way of writing papers is that "it is a waste of time." They have a similar attitude towards reading. Overall, it is much easier for them to read short essays published in periodicals than it is to read academic articles published in scholarly journals and/or books. Again, students are reluctant to critically engage with either sets of reading, scholarly research and writing versus casual reporting and discussion. Most of the students refuse to read and engage scholarly texts while they are willing to read short reports published in regular periodicals. They argue that the former is boring and challenging while the latter is easier and relevant. Some students actually have said that they do not read anything that is more than a few pages (2 to 3 pages). Also, it seems that they even have difficulty engaging with periodicals that question the status quo, or are critical of their favourite sites, for example Facebook.

All of my students (18 to 22 years old, mainly from countries in the Middle East and North Africa) have been active members of Facebook for the past 3 to 5 years. In other words, some of them have grown up with Facebook, as it has been part of their lives since their adolescent years. Interestingly, most of the students' struggle understanding any critical or theoretical concepts related to the "information society" or "social networking." One of their assignments in the online communities was to read two short articles, "With Friends Like These ..." (Hodgkinson, 2008, *Guardian*) and "Facebook Exodus" (Heffernan, 2009, *New York Times*). The authors argue that Facebook's life is coming to an end, and that some of the practices of Facebook are harmful for its members, for example keeping its members' records forever, excessive use of advertisement, and weakening actual communities. I asked the students to write a reflection blog on the two articles. Here are some of the comments posted on the students' blog:

- Facebook has become a large part of our social life and we evaluate everything even people throughout that lens
- Our relationships becoming less intimate and more electronic
- It's funny how "wall" has become more personal than a phone call
- I'm not the only one who says I haven't got time to read and summarize my articles but at some point managed to waste an hour (or more) of my life clicking Refresh or Home, hoping something new will pop up on my Newsfeed
- I honestly think we have become Facebook addicts. It is astonishing how we can't go a day without it. I believe it has become an essential part of our lives. More like a ritual for most of us. This is because (as you suggested) primarily it is free and it's everywhere

- Two years ago, I was totally against Facebook. I was unfortunately convinced and I created an account. Since that day, my grades has dropped really badly and I got really away and far from my parents and my family relationships as I stayed on Facebook almost all the time since I woke up till I went to bed again
- We are wasting away in front of the computer simply to stay up to date on other people's information

Although the articles were cited in their blogs, very little response was dedicated to the arguments put forth by Hodgkinson or Heffernan.

In addition to blogging, students partook in a short informal survey. Here, all the students acknowledged that their time on Facebook is a “waste of time,” and that it has negatively influenced their studies and grades. Some of the students even mentioned that they were addicted to Facebook. Most students highlighted that the only positive aspect of the Facebook is that it helps them stay in touch with friends and family. Although they expressed these sentiments towards Facebook, most of the students viewed the aforementioned articles as one sided, and only exploring the negative aspects of the social networking site. Nonetheless, by the end of each semester there are a few students who start questioning the role of Facebook in their life. This does not mean that they stop their active membership with the site. Some of the changes, for example blogging instead of writing papers and watching videos instead of reading, engaged more students with the topics inside and outside the classroom. However, these changes did not encourage them to be critical towards the culture of branding and bargaining. Creative and critical mind works hand-in-hand. To get the students to creatively and independently engage with Facebook beyond the overwhelming display of peer pressure and advertisement proved to be difficult and complicated. It seems that the agenda of change should be the central to teaching.

“Today, the modern institution of higher learning offers a wide array of different “goods” and allows, even encourages, students—the “customers”—to shop around until they find what they like” (Schwartz, 2004, p. 15). The purpose of critical thinking is not to compete in a market driven economy, but to understand the world divided by political polarities and to explore ways towards positive social and cultural changes. It seems that the instantaneous access to information produces students with lazy habits and characteristics. They barely read, write, or think, as knowledge is one click away. How can educators encourage and promote critical, active, and engaged access to information. The challenge of producing independent and critical thinkers should be addressed at the university level and not through individual courses. A follow up study will explore ways to have students conceptualize critical thinking through the new media.

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