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Media Literacy and Its Use as a Method to Encourage Civic Engagement

Alfabetización mediática y su uso como método para fomentar la participación cívica

Abstract
Changes in technology have opened up a new kind of participatory citizenry; one in which engaged citizens' blog, post, tweet, upload, create, and otherwise interact with others online. This paper explores the intersection of media and information literacy with civic participation by examining three specific programs operating in the United States. These projects include «Powerful Voices for Kids», «The Salzburg Academy on Media and Social Change»; and «Cultivating the NetGeneration of Youth as Global Citizens and Media Literate Leaders in a Digital Age», in which educators and students at schools in the USA and Africa meet virtually and physically to explore collaborative methods that use media to build bridges of understanding. Through analysis of each program's practices and personal interviews with the program director, consistent methods for developing a strong media and information literacy program with a focus on democratic participation are revealed. These include a need for programs to reflect a respect for student interest in popular culture, willingness for program educators to put aside assumptions that students lack an interest in current events, recognition that technology use is a means to an end, not the ultimate goal, and the utilization of a support team for the instructors or educators.

Resumen
Los cambios en la tecnología han posibilitado un nuevo tipo de ciudadanía participativa; los ciudadanos utilizan blogs, correos, tweets, principalmente para crear e interactuar con otros. Este artículo explora la intersección de los medios de comunicación y la alfabetización mediática y su relación con la participación ciudadana, mediante el análisis de tres programas específicos que se llevan a cabo en Estados Unidos. Estos proyectos son «Voces para los niños» (Powerful Voices for Kids), «Academia de Salzburgo en Comunicación y Cambio Social» (The Salzburg Academy on Media and Social Change) y «Educando a jóvenes en Red como ciudadanos globales, alfabetizados mediáticamente en la era digital» (Cultivating the NetGeneration of Youth as Global Citizens and Media Literate Leaders in a Digital Age). En ellos educadores y alumnos de escuelas de Estados Unidos y África tienen encuentros virtuales y presenciales para explorar métodos colaborativos, utilizando los medios para construir puentes de entendimiento. A través del análisis de cada programa y las entrevistas personales con algunos de sus directores, se presentan métodos que consiguen un buen desarrollo de proyectos de alfabetización mediática focalizados en la participación democrática, incluyendo, a su vez, la necesidad de crear actividades que reflejen el respeto hacia el interés de los estudiantes en la cultura popular, la voluntad de los educadores para superar los prejuicios sobre su falta de interés en temas de actualidad, el reconocimiento de la tecnología como un medio y no como un fin en sí misma, y la utilización de un equipo de apoyo para el profesorado.

Keywords / Palabras clave
Media literacy; information literacy, democracy, participation, civic engagement, social change, youth media.
Alfabetización mediática, alfabetización informacional, participación, democracia, compromiso cívico, cambio social, medios de comunicación juveniles.

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1. Introduction

What does it mean to be an engaged citizen in one's community or in the world? Is voting in a local or national election a sign of active participation? Or have recent changes in technology created an opportunity and an expectation for a new kind of participatory citizenry; one in which engaged citizens are those who blog, post, tweet, upload, create and otherwise interact with others online as proof of their deep involvement or commitment to their community or nation?
The news media reported on this unfolding reality in 2011 as numerous individual communities and countries relied on online forums and discussions, citizen journalists and photo-journalists, and community bloggers to set the agenda for civic discourse and eventually, for civic action. From the Arab uprising in several African countries to the «Occupy» movements starting on Wall Street in New York City and later taking place across the globe, citizens are taking advantage of the portability, accessibility, speed and viral-nature that online civic engagement affords. Participatory culture is «where members believe that their contributions matter» according to Jenkins (2006) in his paper «Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture».
For adults, these methods of engagement often tap into the cultural paradigms in which we live. How, then, are young people to gain the thoughtful, analytical skills necessary to engage as strong civic participants; whether in their local community or a more national stage?
«Interactivity is a property of the technology, while participation is a property of culture. Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. A focus on expanding access to new technologies carries us only so far if we do not also foster the skills and cultural knowledge necessary to deploy those tools toward our own ends» (Jenkins, 2006).
Democratic governance requires both an informed citizenry and a citizenry free to express opinions. This freedom is enshrined in the founding documents of many nations and also international organizations. It is found in the Constitution of the United States in the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights. It is also expressed in Article 19 of the University Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948.
In western democracies a guarantee for this freedom was sought through private ownership of the press, rather than government ownership. The authors of «Four Theories of the Press identified four possible systems, each with a different relationship between the press and the state, including the Social Responsibility Theory and the Libertarian Theory. Private ownership was just one of the ways in which it was thought the «right» information could be shared and an informed citizenry created (Seibert, Petersen & Schramm, 1963).
The evolution of modern media corporations has shown that this attention to ownership structures did not adequately describe the conditions necessary for engaging citizens in dialogue. Modern media corporations were privately owned, but it was not clear that these corporations always provided a channel through which citizens could sufficiently express themselves. Often citizens were put in the position of consuming news and information rather than expressing their needs and viewpoints as active participants. But real discussion must take place. Real disagreements must be aired and real compromises must be sought. (Gutmann & Thompson, 1998) This is sometimes referred to as a discursive theory of democracy.
Deep discussion among citizens about their specific needs and interests is of paramount importance if an active citizenry is desired. This balance of theory and practice is a core component of Paolo Freire's concept of «praxis» or informed action. Freire believed education functions most successfully when teacher and student both use their voice for dialogue and discussion and that it is through that, sometimes difficult, dialogue that true alignment and action can take place

(Freire, 2007). The concept of Participatory Action Research expands on Freire's work by recognizing that social change requires all involved parties to examine and discuss an issue or topic in order to change and improve it (Wadsworth, 1998). Often these discussions have taken place in public spaces, such as village squares. Today, this sort of participation takes place increasingly online, through mobile phones or other easily accessible technologies. For youth, this discussion often takes place in the classroom or an informal educational environment.

Henry Jenkins' call to develop the skills and culture knowledge necessary to deploy these tools speaks to the need for educational institutions to respond to this new requirement of civic engagement by teaching the necessary skills in the classroom. Civics lessons in middle and high school too often utilize a curriculum based on antiquated methods of civic engagement. A position statement from the National Council for the Social Studies states, «In the twenty-first century, participatory media education and civic education are inextricable» (Rheingold, 2008). According to Pew Research Center's Internet and the American Life Project as of 2009 over 93% of teens use the internet, 60% of young people 12-17 go online to get news or information about current events or politics and over 70% use an online social networking site. (Pew Internet and the American Life Project, 2011) And yet, primary and secondary schools in the United States rarely integrate the online environment or any type of technology into the classroom as a method of civic engagement or active citizenry.

This paper will examine three programs using a media and information curriculum to engage students in concepts of democracy and governance, freedom of expression, editorial independence, and diversity in media. These concepts frame their activities, their curriculum, and their learning outcomes. In each case, creating an engaged citizenry was a core goal and media and information literacy education was the bridge used to make that happen.

The highlighted programs align with UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers (http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001929/192971e.pdf); specifically Module 1: Citizenship, Freedom of Expression and Information, Access to Information, Democratic Discourse and Life-Long Learning, and Unit 2 on Media and Information Literacy and Civic Participation. The learning objectives focused on 1) understanding and describing the functions of media and other information providers as these relate to access to information and knowledge, self-expression and participation in democratic processes and 2) identifying the conditions needed for other information providers to perform those functions (Wilson & al., 2011).

2. Results

2.1. Global connections and exchange Africa

In Fall 2010 students in Africa and the United States began a multi-year, cultural exchange project titled, «Cultivating the Net Generation of Youth as Global Citizens and Media Literate Leaders in a Digital Age». Three schools in Africa were paired with three schools in the United States: South Africa and California were paired, Uganda and Connecticut were paired, Zambia and Illinois were paired. In addition to the teams of students and educators at the six schools, partners in the project included World Link, the United States State Department's Global Connections Exchange program (GCE), and Net Generation of Youth (NGY). In a personal interview, Project Director, Dr. Ronnie Lowenstein stated, the project was a virtual and physical exchange program in which high school students shared «a commitment to fostering technology-enabled collaborations to build bridges of understanding in an increasingly interconnected world.

Participating schools utilized an inquiry and project based learning model of instruction pioneered by NetGeneration of Youth and aligning with the UNESCO MIL Curriculum for Teachers. Throughout the project, the educators and students engaged in virtual exchanges using technologies such as Skype, NING social networking, and SMART Bridgit conferencing software to facilitate online collaborations. Professional development opportunities enabled educators to design curriculum to develop technology literacy, as well as media and information literacy skills. Students developed proficiencies with technologies as they explored the role of interactive media in their communities, country and around the world. Lessons addressed radio, print, television and interactive media in the student's own country, as well as their partner country and school. Project Director, Dr. Ronnie Lowenstein shares, «the project was designed to cultivate youth not only as analytical thinkers and critical consumers of media, but also as media leaders and creative producers of media who can construct effective multi-media messages that can then be shared with peers and adults around the world».

Each school set up an NGY Ambassador Club to recruit students and provide a framework for their activities. Students were required to meet weekly to participate in the media and information literacy discussions and online forums. But those required meetings soon blossomed into more

frequent student gatherings as the students made deeper connections with their peers across the globe. Jane Nakasama, an African teen, posted this comment to her blog in June 2011, «All these messages that inform, entertain and sell to us every day...how do we look at them, do we easily consume them, condemn them, compliment them? It also comes to our part when we are the ones creating blogs and messages anywhere, what are our aims, sources, courses...do we analyse the crowd we are appealing to?». Jane's post shows her reflecting on her ability to analyze news and information provided to her by the media, as well as her own power as a voice in the media. She is engaging her critical thinking skills to consider how and why the media makes the choices it does regarding public interest, accountability, and questioning what is relevant news. As Lowenstein states, «We want them to be committed to civic life on a global stage».

Certainly programs linking students from different parts of the world have existed for years. But this project's use of media and information literacy as its core connecting concept sets it apart. Lowenstein sees media and information literacy as the most important and most unique aspect of the project. «People in the world are shaped by and shape the media in their culture. If we don't address the skills and understandings that help us to be literate with the media, we cannot engage with one another effectively. It's fundamental to the age in which we're living».

Each location was provided a basic curriculum and access to the NING collaborative online site, but implementation of the program at each location was determined by that individual team of educators and students. This constructivist approach was intentional so that each school team could develop the program that would best fit its students and educators needs. Lowenstein occasionally acted as facilitator in online discussions, gently pushing students to go beyond simply sharing basic thoughts about their community or school to questions requiring analysis and deeper critical thinking. She encouraged them to consider how a particular situation might impact them as media leaders of the future. By selecting specific moments to encourage students to consider their broader role on the world stage, Lowenstein was able to keep the mission of the project clear in the student's minds and not be perceived as merely an intervening adult voice. Alignment with core elements of Participatory Action Research helped to assure that voices from the team, including educators and students, received as much attention as those of the project leaders and professional advisors. Core elements of the UNESCO Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers module on citizenship, freedom of expression, and access to information are integrated into the various activities. Students were consistently asked to reflect on their access to information and how to best evaluate the information they uncovered. By sharing news reports across borders students were able to compare news stories easily and discern how news media shapes the message differently depending on the author. Frequently, blog posts and discussions explored the impact of editorial independence. Access to the full media literacy discussions may be found (http://ngygce.ning.com/forum/categories/media-literacy-education/listForCategory). Project website (https://sites.google.com/site/ngygceafrica).

2.2. Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change

Sometimes a classroom is bound by four walls and a blackboard. Other times a space becomes a classroom based on need. Such was the case for the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change. Each summer since 2007, a small group of college students and faculty have been gathering at a historically significant castle in Austria to explore and create new methods of civic engagement using media. The Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change is a program of the Salzburg Global Seminar, an international program for dialogue and understanding.

The Salzburg Academy poses the questions, «How can students be empowered through media literacy to be global citizens across borders and across divides? How can students use media to have voice? » Students and faculty from nearly ten countries across the globe attend the Academy for three weeks in July. According to Program Director, Paul Mihailidis, students are drawn to the program for a variety of reasons; learning about students beyond their own borders, an interest in media and information, and often a yearning for international travel. Students know the experience will center on media literacy and civic participation, but they are not necessarily well versed in these topics before they arrive. To help this diverse group of participants arrive at the program with a similar framework on these topics, foundational readings in media literacy and citizenship are assigned as pre-readings. Participants are also asked to gather data about their country and its media and information use so that data can be synthesized across all participant countries and a global snapshot may be obtained. Previous pre-research topics gathered data on personal media use, a day without media, popular websites among college students, and trends in social media use. Once the participants are together the on-site learning begins. Early discussions cen-

ter on the basics of media literacy and how understanding (or misunderstanding) of an issue is developed through media representations.
The conversations are not always easy. Participants often come to the program with strongly held beliefs about the «other» and how media has or has not influenced their views. In a personal interview with Program Director, Paul Mihailidis he shares, «We try to get them to understand that everything you don't see or experience first-hand, your understanding and reality is built through the media.
We want them to be empowered to understand this concept and to produce media without borders; to produce media that extends beyond their own home media outlets so that issues can be seen and discussed across borders». The informal setting helps encourage free-flowing conversation and leads to a different kind of dialogue than would be possible in a formal classroom. For many students, it's their first opportunity to ask questions about world issues with people that have experienced a particular current event personally and not just as a story on the TV news. Understanding how war looks and feels to a person who has seen it in their community provides a vitally different point-of-view for the student who has only ever learned of a particular topic through reports in the media. The residential feeling of the setting and sheer number of hours the students spend together helps to create an environment conducive to candid discussion. Students engage in a self-reflective experience in which they explore and question their own cultural frames and then consider how media has shaped those frames.
Throughout the weeks students work together in faculty-led teams to create learning modules on topics such as covering conflict, agenda setting, and freedom of the press. The mini-semester concludes with presentations of student-developed comprehensive curriculum for specific modules. Curriculum typically includes an overview of the topic, recommended readings, exercises, assignments, and multi-media elements. Through the Academy website these elements are made available to educators and others without charge.
Pedagogical approaches outlined in the UNESCO AOC curriculum on civic participation are integrated into the Academy's approach. Activities clearly build on concepts of truthfulness, public interest, proportional and relevant news, and independence. Many student discussions center on how to balance an engaged citizenry's need to publicly criticize the media (and many times, by extension, the government) with a government's stand on privacy. Examples of learning modules are available (www.salzburg.umd.edu/salzburg/new/news/news).
The program takes a unique approach to the topic of global citizenry and media and information literacy. Meeting in person and working, learning and playing together means that participants must engage with an significant level of honesty and vulnerability. Mihaillidis says, «Nothing really replaces having a physical space where people are forced to let their guard down and engage». If the conversations become less respectful or tolerant he gently prods students to consider their role and responsibility in attending the Academy. He tells the students «you have been tasked with coming here to be change agents, to be exposed to different ideas. If we have trouble discussing topics in this neutral space, what will happen when we get back home? Can you get to a point where you can discuss these issues with others who feel differently?».
But it's the media and information literacy thread that truly sets the program apart. Students are not just learning how to use technology to tell a story or share information; they are learning to think critically about the media. Their discussions and learning modules integrate core media and information literacy concepts about authorship, access, ownership, and values. They are considering how one's culture impacts one's interpretation of the news. And they are considering how this information impacts one's decision to be a more engaged citizen.

2.3. Powerful voices for kids

The programs discussed in this paper thus far have explored a media and information literacy program for college students and a program for high school students. Is it possible to develop a program with a focus on civic participation for even younger students? That was precisely the goal for the Temple University Media Education Lab project «Powerful Voices for Kids» (PVK). This program focused on a primary and middle school student population (five to fourteen year olds) at an urban school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States. The participating students were enrolled in a remedial summer school for the first half of the day and a supplemental youth media program was offered as an optional activity for the afternoon.
According to Program Director David Cooper Moore during a personal interview, the Powerful Voices for Kids program was developed as a university-school partnership. The three-week program served approximately 150 students. Undergraduate, graduate and alumni students from Temple University served as instructors, and the primary and middle school students were en-

rolled at the Russell Byers Charter School. A unique aspect of this program was its ability to create a strong academic experience not just for the young students, but for the student-instructors and the schools as well. The stated mission of the Powerful Voices for Kids program is «to strengthen children's abilities to think for themselves, communicate effectively using language and technology tools, and use their powerful voices to contribute to the quality of life in their families, their schools, their communities, and the world» (http://mediaeducationlab.com/our-partners-rbcs).

On the first day, students were grouped by age into «classes» and connected with an undergraduate, graduate or alumni instructor. It wasn't just the young students learning to analyze media and create media messages. For many of the instructors this was their first formal teaching experience. Others had taught but had limited-to-no experience teaching media and information literacy.

Adding further anxiety to the experience, there was no pre-set curriculum for the instructors to follow. Class time was used, in part, to discern student interest in a particular area of popular culture and teachers were expected to integrate those topics into the next day's lesson plan on a component of media and information literacy. Many days began and ended with the instructional team meeting together to brainstorm ideas and troubleshoot issues from the previous day. Topic areas and activities weren't just influenced by the student's interest; they were influenced by the instructor's experience and interest as well. If a particular instructor had experience or an interest in, for example, music production he developed activities around that interest. The central requirement was that the foundational concepts of media and information literacy be integrated into the lesson plan. Instructor Osei Alleyne taught his students about music remix culture. Together, they researched the history and elements of remix culture and discussed relevant issues of copyright and ownership rights. Using Osei's music connections, the students visited a professional recording studio to produce their own remix using clips from the chorus of Eminem's «Not Afraid» and Gyptian's «Hold Yuh».

But lessons weren't just about learning how to use the technology; the focus was on using one's voice to be an engaged citizen. Early discussions uncovered concerns some young student's had about violence in their neighborhoods. Their remix spoke of that violence and contained a strong anti-violence message. The song was uploaded to an all-access website to share with friends, family and the community at large (http://soundcloud.com/davemoorepvk/powerful-voices-for-kids-stop).

Students in a different class expressed concerns about homelessness after seeing several homeless people on their way to school. Seizing on the students own desire to tell others about what they had seen, the instructor encouraged them to create a media project with homelessness as the theme. The students decided to write a song about homelessness. The instructor used the student's interest to help them understand the importance of getting multiple points-of-view when telling a story, especially when the story concerns oppressed or minority populations. As part of their preparation for writing the song, the students spoke with local homeless people. The song reflected on images of homelessness seen in the media and compared those images with the student's own experiences. Another instructor capitalized on his student's interest in recent news stories about flash mobs by helping them make a connection between the choices a reporter makes when gathering and editing news coverage with the choices a video game developer makes when designing a game. Using the program Scratch students created their own video game using the concept of flash mobs as the central theme. Students learned to evaluate mediated messages by using a local event as an example and began to recognize the impact media messages have on democracy and governance.

Moore shares that <<despite the constantly evolving nature of the program, by week two students were already showing an increased understanding of the core concepts of media and information literacy and consistently making connections between those concepts and their impact on civic engagement and democratic discourse.>> They began to understand how the images and stories perpetuated in the media affected their belief systems and those of the people around them. The students gained skills in finding and evaluating sources and understanding more deeply the vital role the news media plays in encouraging citizen participation or discouraging it. The students began to understand how a news story could affect them personally, the impact of a poorly constructed news report, and the ways in which incomplete information can lead to citizen apathy.

In classroom after classroom, day after day, children made videos, produced simple videogames, created basic websites, analyzed news, visited a local TV station, deconstructed commercials and advertising, and participated in robust debates about current events. Students experienced an innovative pedagogy that combined play and learning in the course of media analysis and creative

multimedia composition activities. Through reading, viewing and listening to a variety of traditional and popular culture media texts, children learned how to think abstractly about questions of authorship, audience, and purpose across all types of media. Children experienced the power of being an author of different types of media productions including videos, poetry, music, news articles, videogames, and comic books, working individually and collaboratively so that they could engage more deeply with their communities and the world around them.

3. Discussion

Through a detailed exploration of these three programs certain consistencies are revealed signifying specific methods for developing a strong media and information literacy program with a focus on democratic participation.

All programs reflect a respect for student interest in popular culture. Particularly for younger students, connecting to popular culture is an effective way to gain student attention. For some students, the notion of democratic participation seems a distant topic from their lives. Connecting to students through popular culture provides an access point for an educator.

All programs integrate student interests into the lesson plans. If the goal of a course of study in democratic participation is, ultimately, student participation, then it is vital that the student's own interests in current events are incorporated into the lesson plans. Note that in all the programs described above it was through student discussions that topics evolved and participation was enhanced. Educators, especially those with an interest in discussing certain key topics, may be tempted to forward their own current event agenda, but true democratic participation is more likely to be developed when the students themselves explore the issues and determine where their efforts should be placed. It is then the instructor's responsibility to make the bridge to current events that matter to the students. For many young people, popular culture is where they most likely already feel their voice is heard. Helping them to understand how to use that voice in other ways through the media is a necessary learning outcome for success.

All programs were led by educators willing to put aside any assumptions that students would not be interested in current events. Each program shows that when the current events speak to the interests and concerns of the students, the students engage enthusiastically.

All programs used technology as a means to an end, not as the ultimate goal. In each program, students learned about new technologies and how to use them. But this use was always in the service of a broader goal, that of helping the students to become more active civic participants. Students learned how to use a particular technology so they could tell their story about a specific issue affecting their community or the world: not just to gain proficiency in the technology.

All programs utilized a support team for the instructors or educators. Most often, this support team was comprised of colleagues either new to the topic of media and information literacy, new to the topic of democratic participation, or new to the specific activities. It seemed less important that the support team be experienced in any particular area than that the support team meet consistently to discuss ideas, challenges and outcomes and be willing to try something new the next day.

It is worth noting that while these consistencies certainly bare out across the three programs detailed in this paper, there are numerous other programs taking place in the United States focusing on the intersection of media and information literacy and civic engagement. Prime Movers (www.primemoversmedia.org), the Center for News Literacy (www.centerfornewsliteracy.org) and Project Look Sharp (www.projectlooksharp.org) are just a few of these programs.

New technologies have made communication across towns, across countries, and across the globe increasingly available, easy and often instantaneous. For that communication to be effective requires the dual skills of media and information literacy, as well as an understanding of what it means to be a responsible, engaged citizen. The world is increasingly reliant on educational environments, in formal and informal settings, to help young people gain the skills and knowledge necessary to express their opinions and participate in their own governance.

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