

Media Literacy as Enacting Citizenship

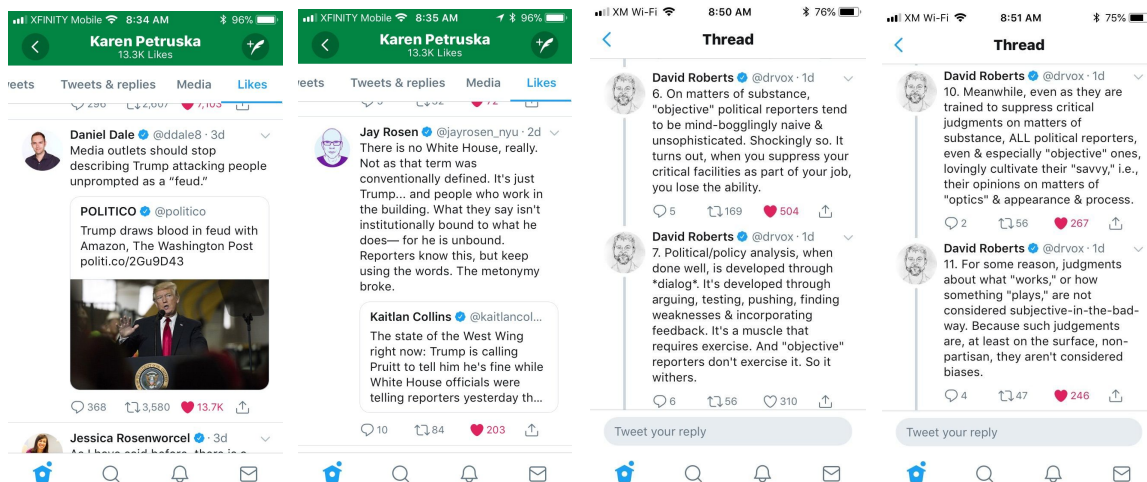
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Media literacy is often held up as a solution for our fraught times of fake news and rancor. But what does “literacy” entail? How can we as screen scholars exploit what we know best to amplify and nuance literacy discussions that focus on such terms as “facts,” “truth,” and “evidence?”

The first thing I ask students to interrogate is the notion of “objectivity,” to consider whether objectivity is possible, whether we should *want* it to be possible, and what are the different stakes of the discussion for journalists, for citizens, and for the powerful in society. This central question invites us to explore the broader civic role of journalism within a democracy, but it also demands students identify as news seekers. I want to move them past the idea of a “facts-only” view of the news, because facts, like most products of culture, are ideological and tend to depend upon your worldview.

In this way, understandings of media literacy benefit from foundational concepts for media and cultural studies: how our very perceptions of reality tend to be structured through symbolic meaning making in ways that demand we confront our own value systems so we can achieve a mutual transparency when in dialogue with others.

I bring in a wide-range of current examples to make the theoretical concrete. I scroll through tweets like those below to demonstrate a micro and macro portrait of this questioning of objectivity in the news, showing for example how at the level of diction, journalists consciously and unconsciously shape meaning.



In terms of longer pieces that help frame a discussion in more depth, a recent article about [activism within journalism](#) fits well into our political moment and the social justice focus of my university. The provocative questions it asks pushes students past surface

questions about objectivity to envision a world in which we—and they themselves—have the potential to be activists, or those who make concrete improvements in the world. Grounding these conversations in attention to student agency undermines apathy and seeks to inspire a sense of mutual responsibility for the ways we all constitute the reality of everyday life.

The second major focus of our interrogation is the advertising business model undergirding most news production in the U.S. Discussions about the press, democracy, hate speech, bias and civic dialogue have recently centered around the operations of social media, particularly as empires built upon on the collection and dissemination of proprietary consumer data. But of course, we in television and new media studies have long been interested in challenging the normalization of the advertising model, and therefore we are well positioned to encourage students to question the normalization of “free” media. The notion of “free,” like the concept of objectivity above, is ripe for exposur—for all the ways it depends upon exploitation, subtle or invisible surveillance, and shifting notions of privacy and property.

Here is where I get more experimental. We have all heard that students do not share an investment in historic notions of privacy, so I would like to try to flip the script to speak in a language more familiar to students. I have an idea for a project—untested as of yet—that would build upon a module exploring the historical partnership between print / television news and the advertising industry, establishing a foundation for the reasons why this partnership developed and what other business models were abandoned. Students would then work in groups to develop alternative business models for our moment now, complete with pitches for a company like Facebook that would explain how a “pivot” might solve current problems while maintaining investor confidence. While this project capitulates to capitalist frameworks, it nevertheless encourages students to embody the personae of change agents and to articulate the values that a business model necessarily communicates. I view this as an active articulation of literacy, which is more than “reading” or “interpreting” but in fact requires “enacting.”

Media literacy does not merely entail the identification of facts or the confidence that there is a truth out there. In fact, I would argue those sorts of conversations lead us into a trap where competing versions of facts simply negate each other. But pulling from our cultural studies foundations, TV and new media scholars can shift the conversation to more productive ground. Students will learn to articulate new questions about the mediascape even as they also strive to express their identities as empowered citizens in their own mediated and civic spaces.

Apologies for missing the conference. Hope it is a great conversation.