

Navigating Critical Media Literacy

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With a political charge running through most all current events, media educators find ourselves potentially handling a live wire when bringing them into the classroom. We are clearly in a time where trust in mass media outlets, especially news media, is precarious, with an increasingly prevalent sentiment out there that much of what is reported is not to be taken at face value. It is too easy for us to dismiss reports that do not align with predetermined worldviews and instead lock into the narrowcasts of cable, websites, and social media that do offer such alignment. As others have pointed out, the very critical tools that we have sought to impart to our students have been part of what has unsettled faith in media trustworthiness. We in media studies are still clearly situated to make an intervention, but our traditional tactics are failing us in many ways. How do we conceptualize and enact approaches to critical media literacy that serve our students and the field more generally?

Much of what has served us as critical media literacy in the past has been about encouraging a skeptical stance and questioning the construction of media texts and the sources which they rely upon, distort, or ignore. Even if it is not our intent, there is often an epistemological presupposition that a best or most accurate understanding is attainable, one that implicitly suggests a correct position on an issue. However, given the complexity of so much of what we discuss, this can be a fool's errand. Instead, we find ourselves looking for the interpretation that best fits the ideological frameworks within which we already operate. Making sense of the world in this way is almost instinctual, finding explanations consonant with the communities in which we already exist. Our students regularly come to us with some pre-existing inclinations, but also ready to hear about other possibilities, other rubrics through which to judge the mediated world surrounding them. On the one hand, this is an opportunity for increasing openness and empathy; on the other, it is a potentially combustible moment in which one can harden their position against the encroachment of liberal academia. Even if not all our students have been exposed to this sentiment, the presence of alternative communities of interpretation and the ambivalence of Internet culture are almost certainly formative parts of their information-gathering experiences.

So, how do we approach media criticism and literacy in this environment? I offer two somewhat recent experiences as jumping off points. Last fall, I had two students wanting to study the operation of fake news in a capstone course for media studies. Each had a different orientation to the topic. Student one was alarmed at how many politicians and political commentators were aiding in the spread of false information, giving it semblances of legitimacy by repeating and promoting it. He was coming from a place of great distrust of mainstream journalism, seeing fake news as an accurate descriptor of the current state of reportage. Student two was concerned about how the term "fake news" was being used by the current administration to discredit unflattering

coverage, effectively positioning student two as critical of student one's premise. I asked them to pair up as peer reviewers as they worked on defining and conducting their research, and though this was not an especially smooth process, having them engage across their somewhat opposed views on the same topic over the course of many weeks did seem to allow them both to operate a bit more empathically as they considered the counterarguments for their own claims. This is a strategy that I hope to build upon in the future, but one that can be tricky, especially when it comes to power imbalance and frictions of individual temperament and conviction.

More recently, in the spring semester, when discussing feminist theory in the context of a graduate course on critical cultural theory, I was surprised by a widely-shared negative (postfeminist) reaction against the continuing relevance of feminism. While many agreed with the concepts (e.g., the male gaze) we had encountered in our readings, they also felt that the emphasis on gender identity was no longer useful and even counterproductive to the pursuit of equality. Our conversation steered into #metoo, which many felt was evidence for the achievement of equality (i.e. women feeling empowered to speak out illustrates progress) rather than evidence for the persistence of patriarchy and systemic abuse of power. While I saw some of their resistance shift then and in later discussions, I am left feeling disheartened. In some ways, it was their critical stances that were leading them to this skeptical view. How do we harness critical skepticism in the most productive ways?