

Chapter 18

Developing Digital Empathy: A Holistic Approach to Media Literacy Research Methods

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ABSTRACT

In the Digital Age, when technology offers many solutions and distractions at the same time, we should use media literacy research to address these advantages and challenges through a holistic approach. This chapter introduces digital empathy as a holistic framework combining empathic design and empathic listening to bridge the traditional protectionist and empowerment approaches in media literacy research. Digital Empathy is a mixed methods approach that has been developed through a longitudinal study. It is an inclusive model that addresses the participants and the researcher's cognitive, emotional, and social skills through empathic design and empathic listening. Using a longitudinal case study of a month-long media literacy summer class with underprivileged high school students, the chapter describes digital empathy, not only as a pedagogical approach, but also as a holistic research method that will advance media literacy scholarship.

INTRODUCTION

Digital and Media literacy research explores human ability to access information, analyze media messages, create media, reflect upon her/his use and act responsibly (Hobbs, 2010). There are two main approaches to media literacy research: protectionism and empowerment (Buckingham, 1998). This chapter calls for using an empathic methodology to advance media literacy research making it more valid and to address ethical issues. The described longitudinal case study of a summer program helped me develop the framework of digital empathy as a research methodology. Digital empathy is the result of my efforts to design a research framework to address cognitive, emotional, and social skills while using digital media.

Digital empathy explores the ability to: analyze and evaluate another's internal state (empathy accuracy); have a sense of identity and agency (self-empathy); recognize, understand, and predict other's thoughts and emotions (cognitive empathy); feel what others feel (affective empathy); role play (imagi-

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native empathy); and be companionate to others (empathic concern), via digital media (see Table 1, Friesem, 2015). My goal in this chapter is to: a) introduce the traditional protectionist and empowerment approaches to media literacy research; b) offer a new framework for media literacy research methods using digital empathy; c) showcase the use of digital empathy as a media literacy research method using one longitudinal case study.

The app generation (Gardner & Davis, 2013), which is increasingly engaged with mobile technology, experiences problems with her/his sense of identity, intimacy, and imagination. It seems that instead of promoting a deep connection and reciprocal interaction, our digital engagement is commercial and superficial making us emotionally detached from each other (Turkle, 2011). In other words, we are connected to our devices and not to the people around us, which put us in a state of “present shock” (Rushkoff, 2013).

One of the solutions for this problem is empathy. Empathy can help people develop: richer analysis and evaluation skills (empathic accuracy), stronger sense of identity (self-empathy), deeper intimacy (cognitive empathy, affective empathy), greater imagination (imaginative empathy), and better collaboration skills (empathic concern). Going back to McLuhan’s (1994[1964]) theory of technology as an extension of man, reiterate the question for the digital age: how do we interact with each other via technology? While media literacy research explores human interactions and understanding of others by using media tools, we should consider combining it with empathy scholarship. Combining recent studies on empathy with media literacy practice and research can help us bridge the gap between the humanistic potential of digital devices and the actual media consumption.

The field of media literacy is influenced by both communication scholarship (Livingstone, 2004) and education scholarship (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). As a young field, media literacy has many tensions that led different scholars and practitioners to define it using different lenses (Hobbs, 1998). The common US definition for media literacy was formulated at the 1992 Aspen Institute where it was described as “the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information in a wide variety of forms” (Aufderheide & Fireston, 1993, p. 6). However, the digital revolution in the last twenty years calls for an updated definition. This is why Hobbs (2010) modified the definition of digital and media literacy as “the ability to make responsible choices, access information... analyze messages... create content... reflect... and take social action” (p. viii). Her addition of social and emotional factors to the traditional cognitive definition opened the door for a holistic approach to media literacy research. Still, a range of different approaches according to a discipline (communication or education, Kubey, 1997) and purpose (protectionism vs. empowerment, Buckingham, 1998) proliferates.

The Media Literacy Tent

In order to study media literacy using digital empathy as practice and research method, we need to understand the different approaches in media literacy research that developed from both Communication and Education disciplines. Communication and Education scholars are part of the Social Sciences, which means that they explore social phenomena to understand and explain the world around us (Singleton, & Straits, 2010). Communication includes: quantitative research such as media effects (represented by Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Potter, 2012), investigating outcomes of media consumption; qualitative research, such as audience research (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison & Weigel, 2006) and media practitioners who study how their participants produce media messages (Tyner, 2003); and mixed methods exploring case studies of media literacy practices (Soep, 2006). In Education, we find descriptions and

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