Chapter 1
Terms of the Digital Age:
Realities and Cultural Paradigms

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ABSTRACT

This chapter defines terms of the digital age as they relate to digital media literacy. The changing landscape of society is demonstrated through the recalibration occurring in media processes and the cultural forms they generate. These conditions have fostered cultural paradigms unique to the digital age: paradigms aligned with either humanistic or capitalist perspectives, and marketing playing a role with respect to this tension. An analysis of two policies in the form of new curricula reveals that more must be done to prepare, protect, and empower a digitally literate citizenry. The chapter closes with an argument that the first step in this direction must involve both establishing digital media literacy as a discipline as well as deepening and extending current media literacy frameworks.

INTRODUCTION

As we entered the second decade of the twenty-first century, digital technology reached capabilities that opened a new era with its own ecosystem: an ecosystem that is dynamic by nature constantly rearranging, restructuring, expanding, and where new ideas sprout into startups that turn concepts into products. The unceasing innovation, shape-shifting, expansion of possibilities, and excitement around all things digital defines the digital age.

The frenetic rapidity of the information revolution has made defining digital-age terms an endless task. As soon as concepts are clarified, new ones emerge and others become obsolete. Therefore, it would be futile to concretize such terms. Instead, this chapter presents definitions as snapshots of the current times, acknowledging that the terms of the digital age can only be captured as they presently stand. In addition to clarifying ideas that are often confusing, this chapter will also engage the tangible, the intangible, and the barely perceptible aspects of digital life, with the goal of defining terms as they directly relate to digital media literacy. This will involve a journey that begins by establishing several foundational definitions and then moves on to discuss tangible artifacts and the cultural forms they en-

able. Next, the chapter critiques the monetization and manipulation efforts underway to push the digital media environment into becoming an integral part of capitalism, and it provides a response in the form of various theoretical frameworks designed to equip the digital citizenry. The chapter also explores the education policies that have been put into practice to implement digital media literacy through a comparison and analysis of two broad-scale curriculum changes in England and the United States. The chapter concludes with the recommendation that digital media literacy be recognized as a discipline as well as a set of skills and offers suggestions for strengthening digital media literacy frameworks.

DIGITAL MEDIA DEFINITIONS

Before defining *digital media literacy*, the notions of a *term* and of *digital media* require clarification. At the most fundamental level, a *term* is a word or phrase used to describe a thing or express a concept. The word *term* will be used here more broadly to refer to various phenomena of the digital age such as changes to culture, identity, and ontology. In *The Medium is the Massage* (1967/2005), McLuhan and Fiore define a *medium* as an extension of some human faculty, either psychic or physical. Their definition recognizes that media extend beyond physical artifacts and products to the less tangible realm of the mind and culture, areas that are examined in this chapter. The definition of *digital media* must begin with an understanding of the unique advantages of their digital nature. One advantage of *digital media* is their flexibility in communication due to their scalability: For example, digital media can be accessed with ease across devices and contexts through *video streaming*. Another advantage is the manner in which they are stored, either as encoded files (MP3 for sound or MP4 for multimedia), on servers (in the cloud), or streamed directly over the Web. Each of these methods provides for a more enduring medium and also makes the portable device a more entrenched actor in virtual life.

Digital environments, however, cannot be accurately characterized without paying careful attention to the multiple, overlapping realities in which the denizens of high-tech societies reside. *Real-life reality* is the world we live in when we are not logged in to cyberspace, while *virtual reality* is the reality associated with interacting in and through cyberspace. In its original conception, *virtual reality* referred to a virtual experience requiring the donning of equipment for moving within 3D virtual environments. This use of the term has largely evolved into references to cyberspace experiences. The idea of reality is further complicated by various interpretations of reality emerging from experiences in the virtual. Such interpretations are different in nature, as illustrated by *augmented reality* and *hyperreality*. Augmented reality is a composite presentation of real life augmented by virtual overlays, usually through a smartphone or tablet. Whereas, hyperreality is a psychological state involving virtual experiences that are perceived to be better than real life (Rosenfeld, 2015).

Conceptually, *digital media literacy* is approached quite differently among scholars; its conceptions vary from instrumental to psychological and sociocultural. In the following, multiple perspectives on the subject are introduced, drawing from important digital and media literacy thinkers, policy makers, and scholars. The Royal Society,[1] an independent body of research scholars composed of the UK's most renowned scientific thinkers (Stephen Hawking and Tim Berners-Lee are fellows) serves as a logical starting point, due to the work they have done on digital literacy. Since its inception in 1660, the Society's mission has been to recognize, promote, and support excellence in science and to encourage the development and use of science for the benefit of humanity. It is not surprising that these scholars use a

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