

Chapter 5

Preparing to Be Digital: The Paradigm Shift for Media Studies and Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Today most media messages are shaped by and circulate within the multi-faceted, always available, participatory communication space called the digital environment. This participatory, de-centralized space indicates a paradigm shift in media and communication, and therefore in the culture at large. In the new paradigm, comprehensive media ecology-infused media literacy is necessary not only in the disciplines of communication and media studies, but across higher education. One media department at a U.S. urban university is beginning to implement a comprehensive five-part model of activist media literacy education as it transitions from traditional media industry training to deeper media literacy-informed education. The five-part model engages core concepts from media ecology, critical cultural studies, and critical pedagogy, with a final goal of educating enlightened media practitioners interested in seeking social change. In the emerging media environment, messages, forms, and new ways of thinking and being ought to be the mandate of twenty-first century higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Because of the onslaught of cultural change wrought by the Internet and digital communication in general, and to the media infrastructure and industries specifically, one could argue that, within higher education, communication and media departments have had to re-tool their curricula at a faster pace than many other academic departments or fields. While this is not news to anyone teaching in media, the departments and programs themselves have been managing the changes in various different ways.¹ While there is no systematic research indicating patterns, discussions with U.S. media department faculty across a range of programs indicate various ways in which media departments and programs have responded to the emerging digital environment. Some have added digital, multimedia, or “new” media courses to existing foundational curricula. Faculty in other departments have resisted making holistic

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changes to curricula, preferring to cling to older, more traditional models of teaching legacy media, perhaps because they are familiar and safe. Journalism, for example, is one arena wherein some faculty have resisted re-assessing and implementing full-on curricular change, even though journalism as a genre and practice has been radically shifting over at least the past decade (Fry, 2008; Scheller, 2016). Other departments have embraced holistic change, but it seems they are the exception, not the rule, as most media and communication departments are struggling with their direction and their vision, and have been able to maintain slow and steady change.

The presidential campaign and election of 2016 was the political and cultural moment when media faculty of all stripes, and especially journalism educators, were confronted head-on with the realities of the digital information environment and what it meant for news and mediated information today and in the future. There was no hiding from the vast changes wrought by the digital environment because of social media and its fake news spawn. Decisions about how to adequately teach journalism, indeed how to adequately teach *media*, became unavoidable. Currently communication and media faculty, most insecure about the future of both media and higher education, are scrambling to understand how best to move forward.

This state of insecurity signals a crisis, and perhaps less dramatically, a paradigm shift, across all media, not just in the realm of news. Certainly the foundation of what we know about news and information appears to have crumbled, but the same applies to entertainment, advertising, and all of our traditional categories or genres of content. What we know about all media has changed. More to the point, the whole media environment, including *how* we know, has changed. Today information and entertainment—via traditional news and entertainment outlets and other ways we have been accessing them---are shaped by and circulate within a multi-faceted, always available, participatory communication space (Fry, 2016). This space is the digital environment. The crisis is that most people, not just students, don't know how to think through all the implications of living and operating there. They simply don't understand how or when the digital environment of participation and information eclipsed legacy media forms, and what that means. As a result, many of them feel unable to knowledgeably navigate not only the present, but also the future. Even many people who study and teach communication, media, and the connections between how we communicate and how we understand and operate in the world (including how we are organized and governed) are at a loss to explain exactly how the rules for everything connected to communicating and engaging seem to have changed, why it is difficult to fully explain the change, and, most importantly, why the future is such a question mark.

This chapter argues that media and communication departments can most successfully and knowledgeably move forward by teaching students to truly understand the digital communication space, and to confront full on the changes wrought by the digital environment. The most thorough understanding, education, and confrontation comes from comprehensive critical and media ecology-infused media literacy. One media department, the Department of Television and Radio at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, is included here as a case study for implementing this model of media literacy education, with the goal of training enlightened practitioners and citizens working in a vast range of media careers. Because comprehensive media literacy education cultivates critical thinking and production skills that are necessary for everyone, not just media students, the ultimate goal is, and should be, to encourage media literacy across the breadth of higher education.

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