

Chapter 18

Media Literacy for Political Cognition in Higher Education: A Solution-Centered Approach

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ABSTRACT

Civic education has long been a goal of liberal education, and many institutions are renewing their commitment to meaningful civic engagement as both a philosophical and educational goal of higher education. Civic engagement and media literacy are essential to fostering democracy. This chapter outlines the shared ideological and pedagogical approaches to civic and political engagement and its connection to media literacy education. The 2016 election cycle has presented a number of challenges for civic engagement and media literacy educators. Many of the core values and beliefs related to critical thinking and information literacy have been challenged.

INTRODUCTION

Media literacy and civic engagement in higher education share the same education philosophy stemming from John Dewey's concept of "liberal education," or liberal arts curriculum. This is foundational to the way in which American institutions of higher education approach teaching and learning. The basic concept of liberal arts is the connection between lived experience, expert knowledge, and critical thinking. Media literacy education is centered upon interplay between media and information, experience, and critical thinking (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Dewey (2008) argues that liberal education is necessary for democracy to function properly. Media and information literacy education fosters the skills and motivation for further student civic engagement (Martens & Hobbs, 2015). In both contexts, the central argument is that the masses can be manipulated, through media and through politics, to act against their best interests. To counteract this manipulation, colleges and universities must teach people to critical think about their lived experiences and foster skills that enable them to see through manipulation, or, at the very least, be aware of manipulation.

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Although there is clear philosophical justification for media literacy and civic engagement in higher education, there are numerous barriers to this education as well. In this chapter, the author argues that there is an information crisis that challenges the very foundation of media literacy and civic education. While there is still some debate into Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, it is clear that powerful actors attempted to manipulate the outcome of the election through traditional and social media (Demirjian, 2017). This manipulation should concern both media literacy and civic engagement practitioners. Beyond Russian influence, the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election was one of the most divisive in recent memory (Balz, 2016). “More so than in some past campaigns, however, the effect of all this seems to be accentuating the gap between left and right, between Democrats and Republicans, between elites and the rest of the population” (Balz, 2016, para. 8). Higher education institutions have always mediated between individuals and society; however, in time of crisis and division this mediation is critical to better both individuals and society (Maguire, 1982).

This chapter explores the underlining philosophical foundations of media literacy and civic engagement in higher education and suggest a pedagogical approach that considers the current political climate. Specifically, this chapter outlines the current “post-truth” political environment and its implications for media literacy and civic engagement; then conceptualizes civic engagement and media literacy pedagogy; and then discusses how the media influences civic engagement, knowledge, and politics.

THE INFORMATION CRISIS IN A POST-TRUTH ERA

The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election cycle has presented several challenges for anyone who deals with facts and information. Whether it be a journalist, scientist, or teacher, many of the core values and beliefs related to critical thinking and information literacy have been challenged. For those in higher education who focus upon civic and political engagement, the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election cycle have been difficult because it challenges the basic tenets of civic engagement pedagogy: political neutrality/objectivity, rational decision making, and information/media literacy. The news media has struggled to cover Donald Trump’s campaign and presidency due to its disregard for facts (Noah, 2016). During the primary, *Politico* tracked the statement of both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump for five days, Trump averaged one falsehood or lie every three minutes and 15 seconds, which was about four times as many false statements as Clinton (Cheney, Arnsdorf, Lippman, Strauss, & Griffiths, 2016). According to Politifact (2017), out of 460 fact checked statement, 5% were deemed true, 12% were mostly true, 15% were half true, 21% were mostly false, 33% were false, 15% were extremely false or “pants on fire.” Following the 2016 election, Trevor Noah, host of *The Daily Show*, articulated the central problem with the Trump presidency, “historically, every politician the news has ever dealt with, [...] have one thing in common, in some way, shape, or form they all use facts. Even if they lie, politician’s lies are based on facts. Until Donald Trump, this is how politicians lied, that is why fact shaming worked.” What Noah (2016) is arguing with Donald Trump, do not waste energy disproving the claims that cannot be proven, claims that were uttered without any intention of factual accuracy, claims that support an alternative narrative that is based in an ideological reality, not a factual reality. Facts matter, but how the news media uses facts needed to be reconsidered (Noah, 2016). While Trevor Noah is speaking specific to the news media, “fact shaming” or fact checking is a failing of the political Left, the scientist, and the university instructor. Lakoff (2014) argues that progressives (liberals) have always believed that proving a statement is a lie or is disproved by factual evidence is enough to dissuade people from supporting a political

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