

Chapter 11

Teaching in a Post–Truth World: A Vibe Check for Critical Social Media Literacy

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ABSTRACT

The rapid spread of mis/disinformation on social media creates a need for teachers to be better educated in how to navigate social media. The existing research suggests that there is a lack of formal requirements to teach about this phenomenon, and this paper helps to answer the call by reviewing the literature. This chapter also provides a helpful new mnemonic device for teachers and a theoretical framework to help justify a critical approach. Ultimately this chapter outlines the need for further study and reinforces the call for further instruction across diverse levels of instruction and curricula to help combat the spread of mis/disinformation.

INTRODUCTION: OPENING THE BOX OF CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY

For this theoretical framework I have reviewed the literature, and I have disassembled the pieces of critical social media literacy; I have analyzed the component pieces and connected them to theoretical foundations upon which this area of study can stand. In so doing, I have created the Vibe Check tool that could help teachers and students navigate media literacy. The need to study this field relies heavily on socio-political issues. The awesome power of social media to influence elections, science, and the world was researched by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017). They note that it was unlikely the difference maker in the 2016 election, but they also note that the compounded exposure of fake news online is likely more impactful than exposure to a television commercial upon which they based their studies numbers. The term “alternative facts” coined by Kellyanne Conway on January 22, 2017 has joined the vernacular, and this gives merit to the need for a critical social media literacy. In the years leading up to and following the elections of 2016 both in Britain and the US, social media have proved instrumental in engineering the outcomes, and when social media is policy, we must teach it, yet there remains no

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formal U.S. class that requires the teaching of the skills needed to navigate the search for truth (Cruz et al., 2019). In a Pew research poll (2020a) of American trends, 86% of respondents claimed to use social media, and 98% of respondents claimed to have a smart phone. In another Pew research poll in (2020b) about news consumption 28% of respondents indicated that they got their political news from a media app, and 17% relied on social media.

When we engage with social media at these rates, we are not just engaging with static images, but instead an entire range of media that includes film. Film clips make popular memes, and their nuance and rhetorical power enter the zeitgeist at lightning quick rates. Film is interspersed throughout social media by user sampling, and social media users are increasingly being pushed to generate their own mini films to fit into easily consumable time frames. The evolution of deep fake technology heralds an even more unique need to develop the media literacy skills of students. Romero Walker (2021) argues that new generations of media literate students must tackle the nuanced elements of exposure to film and its means of production, so that our students can become better creators of media. Further, if progress is to be made in the realm of media literacy, a broader approach to educating students about film and its rhetorical impacts will be required. I argue that film studies and media literacy should be adopted across curricula and age ranges.

In the world that we live in there is a propensity to believe what suits our own confirmation bias, and the media that we consume can be highly tailored to our own desires, and this leads to a diet of consumption where our emotions hold bigger sway on our interpretations of truth than do researched supported facts. Ralph Keyes (2004) calls this the “Post-truth era,” and if this era is to come to an end, there must be a means of educating the youth about how facts are being presented and manipulated in digital spaces. Thus, epistemically I assert that there are societal truths that are objectively provable, but I hold that the interpretation of their meaning is negotiated within communities. Further, I draw from Cruz, et al. (2019) who also describe our current era as a time of “disquiet” which they derive from Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935). “Disquiet” here means a period of restlessness and uncertainty everywhere. Cruz et al. argued that “critical media literacy remains the only hope in order to develop an understanding of what is happening in the rapidly changing and evolving digitally networked society.” I hold that there is disquiet and that we live in a post-truth society. In addition, I add the urgency of Giroux (2015) who notes that in the focus on selfies and the self as capital, we have given up our individual and political freedoms in search of algorithmic success. Further, I point to the need for a critical social media literacy to help us navigate the participatory technologies that, much like Pandora’s box, contain, pestilence, hope, and permanence.

UPDATING THE TIMELINE AND CHECKING MY STORIES

Every bit as important as raising ethical standards is making human links strong enough that those who enjoy them think twice before telling each other a lie. Nothing encourages truth telling more than feeling connected to others whom we saw yesterday and may see tomorrow. Because honesty is so important among those who interact on a regular basis, telling the truth is a way of affirming human ties. The more tied we feel to others, the less likely we are to deceive them. Just as lying degrades human connections, truthfulness invigorates them. In this sense honesty is a sign of aspiration, of hope, of faith in the prospect of human community.

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