Chapter XVIII

Digital Literacy and Cultural Mediations to the Digital Divide

Monica Fantin, Universidade Federal De Santa Catarina (UFSC), Brazil

Gilka Girardello, Universidade Federal De Santa Catarina (UFSC), Brazil

Abstract

This chapter discusses the digital divide from the perspective of education and culture and highlights the forms in which the problem is presented in Brazil, understanding that it is not exclusive to this context. Given the complex challenges to digital inclusion in the context of globalization, the chapter emphasizes that for children and young people to be able to appropriate new technologies and languages in a significant manner, the promotion of digital literacy should be realized with respect to the concept of multiliteracies. Digital inclusion means much more than access to technologies and is understood as one of the fronts in the struggle against poverty and inequality. The authors propose that the understanding of the digital divide be

enriched with the valorization of cultural mediations in the construction of digital literacy. In this sense, a culturalist perspective of media education can promote digital inclusion that is an experience of citizenship, belonging, and critical and creative participation of children and young people in the culture.

Introduction

In the early days of the popularization of personal computers in the 1980s, many people spoke of the infinite potential of the information highway that promised egalitarian and multidirectional communication among all peoples, groups, and nations. But another metaphor, critical of the naive optimism of the early years, did not take long to appear: that of the digital divide. How can the abyss that separates the digitally literate from the digitally illiterate—commonly understood as those excluded from the technological promise—be gapped? What other image could represent this tension in an alternative form, not as an unpassable chasm but as a space to be traversed? A river, which both separates and unites? A sea of currents that at once flow together and apart? How can this river be crossed, this sea be navigated?

This chapter proposes to discuss this problem—the distance between those who have and those who do not have complete access to the archives of culture made available by the media and the possibilities of recreating them critically. We focus on the new configurations that the problem takes with the intensification of the presence of digital technologies in education and culture. Our discussion seeks to identify possible contributions to the dilemmas of media education and of digital literacy that emerge from the Brazilian scene—a country of continental dimensions, where the pulsation of globalized media culture co-exists with a strong and sometimes preliterate popular culture, often in the same city and just a few blocks away. Our anchor in the problems as they are presented in Brazil does not mean, however, that we see the Brazilian or Latin American context as exclusive.

The diversity of semiotic practices and dislocations resulting from the forms by which industrial culture was incorporated into local contexts has challenged Brazilian thinkers for a number of decades. Concepts such as syncretism and cultural anthropophagy marked sociological, anthropological, and literary thinking in the country during the past century, in the search to understand the tensions between the "local" and "global" images and narratives, tensions that are at times generative and at times paralyzing. Paulo Freire's (2000) proposal for a pedagogy of liberation, with its emphasis on a dialogical methodology that would be a space for a radical and micropolitical criticism of oppression, continues to inspire a large number of educational experiences, in and outside of schools. Nevertheless, although these conceptual proposals are on the horizon of an increasing number of media education practices, they are rarely explicit.

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