1. AN INTRODUCTION

Can Critical Media Literacy Save Us?

INTRODUCTION

This edited collection is not a response to the 2016 United States Presidential Election so much as it is a response to the issues highlighted through that single event and since when incredibly smart, sophisticated, and intelligent members of our society were confused by misinformation campaigns. While media literacy and critical media literacy are ideas we've both interacted with leading up to this point, including using activities in teaching K-12 students and in methods of teaching courses we've taught at our respective universities, the need for increased attention to these issues has, we argue, never reached a flash point like the present.

Trying to write about these topics at this particular point in American history feels akin to trying to run out of a high rise hotel during an earthquake. Each step that lands finds the hallway floor in a bit of a different place than it was a split second earlier, bouncing us into the walls that may or may not be crumbling down around us. Other times it feels like the floor is altogether gone and we must suddenly leap to where a floor remains. What we meant when we said "fake news" in late 2016/early 2017 was clearly very different than what we mean now (November 2017) or what it may mean when this book is released. What we meant then was that fake news was the misinformation and literally untrue news stories that swirled in the political toilet that was the 2016 election cycle, stories with enough truth to be believable but that misrepresented—or completely falsified—the facts. A particularly famous case of this is referred to as "Pizzagate." *The New York Times* summarizes the event in the opening to an article:

Edgar M. Welch, a 28-year-old father of two from Salisbury, N.C., recently read online that Comet Ping Pong, a pizza restaurant in northwest Washington, was harboring young children as sex slaves as part of a child-abuse ring led by Hillary Clinton.

The articles making those allegations were widespread across the web, appearing on sites including Facebook and Twitter. Apparently concerned, Mr. Welch drove about six hours on Sunday from his home to Comet Ping Pong to see the situation for himself, according to court documents. Not long after arriving at the pizzeria, the police said, he fired from an assault-like AR-15 rifle. (Kang & Goldman, 2016, n.p.)

Needless to say, Hillary Clinton and Comet King Pizza were not running a child-abuse ring but the story that prompted Mr. Welch to open fire—a story equal parts outrageous and inflammatory—did not need to rely on truth to have an impact, it just needed to be circulating in the world, to be shared and re-shared on social media platforms in order to mislead and incite a violent response. This was fake news that could have killed but the concept of fake news continues to evolve in front of our eyes. No questions asked, fake news, whichever version of it, is potentially deadly.

In July 2017 President Trump released a video showing him in a professional wrestling scenario taking down a person wearing a CNN icon over their face. For posterity's sake, let us say that again: the President of the United States of America shared a video that depicts him body slamming someone representing the media, one he frequently refers to as “fake news,” and “fake news media.” We often feel as though we can tune into a real life reality television show by simply turning on the daily news.

But let's take a serious historical look at this. Genocides have frequently relied on misinformation and complete control of the media to enact atrocities. The Cambodian Genocide began in earnest when the Khmer Rouge evacuated cities, announcing that the cities needed to be evacuated in advance of American bombings. Cambodians were marched outside of their cities literally to their deaths or to agrarian work camps (and then to their deaths) under the guise of a fake news story—that the Americans were coming to bomb their cities. Between 1.5 and 3 million people were killed.

Is critical media literacy a potentially lifesaving tool? We hope that sentiment is an overstatement but teaching the current school-aged generation to be more savvy consumers and creators of media should become an absolute priority of schooling in America. But, as Kellner and Share (2007) relate, “for most students in the United States, critical media literacy is not an option because it is not available; it is not even on the radar” (p. 59). What's become clearer in our efforts to edit this book and collect some outstanding thinking on these issues is that the concepts of fake news and existing in a post-truth society are constantly changing, sometimes daily. So whatever is said in the pages that follow and how we start looking at these issues throughout the education profession, we must be quick to first acknowledge that what we know today and what our students can do today may only help them for today; nefarious and/or profit-minded forces are inventing ways to our wallets, hearts, and minds as we meekly type this introduction.

As a high school teacher in the early 2000's, Chris used the backs of *Rolling Stone* magazines to introduce students to the concept of media literacy, prompting students to identify the messages portrayed by companies like Smirnoff Vodka and Camel Cigarettes. Students—through a process of understanding the semiotics of the magazine back covers—found it surprising that they almost all targeted adolescents, despite their products being illegal to that age group. Teaching media literacy skills then included having students identify messages in media, analyze those messages

for underlying meanings, and eventually create media with embedded messaging. We should say that what Chris did in his classroom was not something overtly mentioned in the standards or expectations for a 9th or 11th grade English class but rather something he brought into school because he felt it was important.

In the fall of 2016, just after the U.S. elected Donald Trump president, a black female first-year student of Paul's submitted an essay on the prospects for Trump's presidency. The course is a first-year writing seminar focusing on James Baldwin in the context of Black Lives Matter; therefore, throughout the course, students have been asked to critically investigate race, racism, gender, sexism, and all types of bias related to the U.S.—through the writing of Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Roxane Gay, Teju Cole, and Arundhati Roy, among others.

The student's discussion of Trump's policies, however, were hyperlinked to Trump's campaign website. Discussing the draft with the student revealed that the current post-truth America is a significant issue among youth who seem unable to distinguish between facts and so-called fake news. Here, Paul is attempting to employ critical media literacy but is met with resistance from his promising and thoughtful students.

A longtime advocate of media literacy, Renee Hobbs, summarizes the situation we presently face: "Not only are we seeing more emotionally manipulative online content, but it is also more challenging to find and validate the source of the information we consume" (2017, n.p.). She continues, "The quality of civic education and civic learning in public education must be continually responsive to the lived experience of the students we serve," and those experiences happen "in the face of increasing polarization" (n.p.).

Turning finally to Kellner and Share (2007), we define critical media literacy for the purposes of this volume as "an educational response that expands the notion of media literacy to include different forms of mass communication, popular culture, and new technologies" (p. 59) and "focuses on the ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality" (p. 60). It is the goal of this volume to build the aptitude and skill set of students and their teachers for critical media literacy in hopes for a better tomorrow.

CHAPTERS IN THIS VOLUME

Our contributors range from professors of English education, social studies education, communication, and English to practicing K-12 teachers, and we are certainly indebted to them for the quality of this edited collection. Similar to their unwillingness to be categorized in any sort of neat and orderly fashion, the chapters they contributed—while all relating directly to our goals of this book—take very different approaches to critical media literacy, fake news, and teaching in post-truth America. We've put the chapters in an order that felt natural to us and that grouped authors speaking to similar audiences. In Chapter Two, Co-Editor Paul Thomas

foregrounds the rest of this book with a foundational offering that lays bare much of what has contributed to the current situation. In “An Educator’s Primer: Fake news, Post-Truth, and a Critical Free Press,” Thomas defines the terms and contexts for teaching critical media literacy, addresses the mainstream media and their responsibility in post truth disocurse, and offers an explanation of how we arrived at the present situation through a metaphor: crossing the Bigfoot line. He calls for a critical free press and for critical literacy education to address the issues afoot, ending with a dire warning: “We are a people without critical literacy and that may result in our being the pawns we deserve to be.”

In Chapter Three, “Reconsidering Evidence in Real World Arguments,” Troy Hicks and Kristen Hawley Turner harness argumentation to address the new reality of a post-truth world. In this extended consideration of what qualifies as evidence and how, Hicks and Turner offer practical advice for writing teachers seeking to address social media, ending with the acronym MINDFUL to help students consider and reconsider evidence. Next, “What is the Story? Reading the Web as Narrative” by Sharon Murchie and Janet Neyer offers an age old solution to a modern problem in encouraging teachers to have their students unpack the narrative in their lives, in this case, their digital lives. Their classroom practice and trials and errors with students in Michigan convey the struggle as well as several methods for finding the essence of these current stories.

“Fighting ‘Fake News’ in an Age of Digital Disorientation: Towards ‘Real News,’ Critical Media Literacy Education, and Independent Journalism for 21st Century Citizens,” Chapter Five, by professor and practitioner of media Rob Williams, unpacks a culture of disinformation by defining “real news,” outlining what all “fake news” exists, summoning Chomsky and Hermann’s “propaganda model of news,” and finally charting a course for “real news” to win the day. In Chapter Six, “Educating the Myth-Led: Critical Literacy Pedagogy in a Post-Truth World,” Robert Williams and Daniel Woods, colleagues at Radford University, invoke and build on the work of Paulo Freire (and many others) to deal with the present intellectual and practical issues by calling for the use of multiple texts—including psychology and offerings from canonical literature—to analyze and critique and act. Joanne Addison’s “Teaching Critical Media Literacy as a Social Process in Writing Intensive Classrooms” (Chapter Seven), offers theoretical and practical advice for writing instructors to “empower students as agents in a participatory democracy.”

Chapter Eight’s team of authors—Jason Endacott, Matt Dingler, Seth French, and John Broome—takes on those people in our social networks guilty of sharing fake news and further propogating propaganda. “Before You Click ‘Share’: Mindful Media Literacy as a Positive Civic Act” advocates for processes and approaches to use with students that will enable them to engage in social spaces carefully and with eyes wide open to the nature of post-truth America. “Engaging the Storied Mind: Teaching Critical Media Literacy through Narrative” by Erin O’Neill Armendarez provides a complementary approach to addressing CML

through narrative to the one offered by Murchie and Neyer in chapter three. By providing examples of stock stories as they exist throughout popular culture, especially how vastly different stories or approaches tell essentially identical stories, O'Neill Armendarez offers her students opportunities to identify when stories are used for nefarious purposes.

Mark Lewis' "Supporting Media-Savvy Youth-Activists: The Case of Marcus Yallow" invokes young adult literature to provide a counter-narrative to much of what was said following the election, something to the effect of blaming the youth or the schools for America's inability to distinguish between fact and fiction. Grounded in a youth lens (Petrone, Sarigianides, & Lewis, 2014) that counters the deficit model thinking about youth, Lewis traces Marcus Yallow through eerily similar circumstances in fiction to challenge and advance our view of youth. Chapter Eleven, "Creating Wobble in a World of Spin: Positioning Students to Challenge Media Poses," begins with the acknowledgement that the blurred lines of fact and fiction are a reality, one that we'll suggest won't change. Sarah Bonner, Robyn Seglem, and Antero Garcia build on the practical implementation (in Sarah's classroom) of Antero's 2015 book *Pose, Wobble, Flow: A Culturally Proactive Approach to Literacy Instruction*. Sarah's students work through the framework in regards to critical media literacy using the book *unSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation* to help them unlock meaning in language and identify how it can be used to distort the truth.

We encourage you to pick up this book as a whole and read it through to the end or find individual chapters that fit your interests and applications. While your classroom teaching situation may not look like each of those collected here, we find the lessons to be universal and, as we mentioned, never more important than right now. Can Critical Media Literacy save us, as the title to this introduction provokes? In short, we will only know if we try.

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