

Critically analyzing the meanings of “critical” media literacy

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a critical analysis into how authors of publications about critical media literacy express what they mean by the term. The use of multiple strategies to examine the degree to which these authors exhibit a sharing of meaning led to the conclusion that there are far more differences than commonalities across definitions of critical media literacy. The implications of this conclusion raise important questions about the value of a literature where authors seem to express so many different meanings for the concept that they use to label their common concern.

Keywords: *critical analysis, critical media literacy, media literacy, sharing meaning.*



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INTRODUCTION

In the last several decades, some media scholars have been arguing that there is a need to move beyond media literacy to what they call “critical media literacy” (e.g., Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007; Sholle & Denski, 1995; Thevenin & Mihailidis, 2012). Scholars who use the term “critical media literacy” (CML) claim that the traditional approaches to media education, including the media literacy (ML) approach, have not been effective enough in educating students to deal with the increasing number of challenges in the new media environment (Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005). However, authors who use the term have been criticized for presenting so many varied meanings for it that it is not clear what the term means (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Wright, 2020). For example, Wright (2020) argues that with all the variation in meanings throughout the literature, CML “has been a somewhat slippery concept at best and a misappropriated one at worst” (p. 2).

The purpose of this study is to generate an answer to the following question: Do authors who present their definitions for “critical media literacy” exhibit a commonly shared meaning?

METHOD

The process of analysis followed a non-quantitative inductive method that involved seven steps. The first step focused on identifying a set of publications to use as a data base for this critical analysis. This step began with the examination of all articles published in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* to identify those articles where authors presented their ideas about what CML is and how it should be used to improve media education. A total of 18 articles were found to meet this criterion. The reference lists of those 18 articles were mined for other publications where authors presented their ideas about CML, and this snowball technique increased the list of publications to 53.

The second step focused on capturing the meanings those authors were presenting for CML by identifying the definitions they provided. It is important to note that none of the publications presented a simple one-sentence glossary-type definition; instead, the authors of all of these publications conveyed their meanings for CML by presenting multiple definitional elements extending over paragraphs – and in many cases – over pages. All of this definitional information was copied into a file for each publication.

In the third step, all of that definitional material was analyzed in order to break those extended definitions down into individual elements by identifying the different ideas expressed in each definition. A citation (name of author(s) and publication date) was attached to each definitional element to keep track of where each definitional idea had been found.

In the fourth step, duplications were collapsed into one entry. When we found the exact same definitional element appearing in more than one publication, we collapsed those duplications into one entry followed by a list of the individual publications that mentioned this idea. This step resulted in identifying 172 unique definitional elements.

The fifth step began the process of organizing all of the 172 definitional elements identified in the previous step into an initial set of three broad categories: (1) purposes expressed for CML, (2) the essential skills required in the CML approach to media education, and (3) key areas of knowledge that illuminate what the CML approach is.

The sixth step began a process of refinement. The definitional elements within a category were examined for patterns of similarities and differences. A pattern of similarity was satisfied when it was determined that all the definitional elements in a grouping shared a key characteristic. When differences were found among the definitional elements in a grouping, those definitional elements that exhibited those differences were moved into another grouping. Sometimes, especially in the beginning of this process, there was a need to create new groupings to accommodate the definitional elements that had to be moved out of their previous grouping, which brings us to the next step in the process. The primary challenge in working through this step was to determine what was a similarity and what was a difference in meaning. As for similarities, there were times when authors appeared to be expressing the same meaning although they were using different terms to do so. In order to determine if the different terms should be considered as synonyms, we had to consider the context. As for differences, we again had to be sensitive to the context of the presentation. For example, there were situations where Author X would present a particular idea and attribute it to Author Y. If Author X presented no other definitional elements for CML, we concluded that Author X was accepting the meaning presented by Author Y. However, if Author X continued to add definitional elements beyond the description of Author Y’s cited meaning in a way that showed a deviation from the meaning presented by Author Y, then we considered

this different than a simple elaboration of the same idea and instead we considered it to be a movement toward a new meaning; in this situation we regarded the meaning expressed by Author X to start out the same as the meaning expressed by Author Y but the extension of that idea changed its meaning to something different from what Author Y had expressed; therefore we considered this to be the expression of two different meanings.

The seventh step was concerned with the creation of new categories both horizontally as well as vertically. “Horizontal” refers to the creation of categories at the same level of generality, whereas “vertical” refers to the creation of categories that are either superordinate or sub-ordinate to the initial category. For example, the classification of all skills into the same category indicates that all those definitional elements referred to some kind of cognitive ability of concern to CML. Although all the elements in that broad category shared this characteristic, there were at the same time many differences exhibited in terms of types of skills (i.e., exposure skills, information processing type skills, production skills, etc.), which indicated a need to sub-divide the broad category of skills into sub-ordinate groupings in order to display the different types. This process of sub-division at times involved several levels. For example, information processing was a sub-category of skills that was further divided into sub-sub-categories of analysis, patterning, evaluation, and critical analysis.

Steps six and seven were repeated in an iterative process of refining the categories. This process required several dozen iterations spaced out over more than a year. In each iteration, the elements were tentatively moved around to create what appeared to be – at the time – the most meaningful groupings such that (1) all the elements in one group shared the same idea at the same level of generality, and (2) there were enough categories to contain all the definitional elements in our analysis.

This iterative process of organizing meanings for CML can best be described as a spiraling hermeneutic progression. By repeating steps six and seven again and again, we appeared to be going around and around in a circle. However, it is more accurate to describe it as a spiral because each iteration resulted in a heightened awareness about which categories needed to be refined along with an increasingly elaborate context for determining what those refinements should be. Thus, each subsequent iteration required fewer changes compared to the previous iteration until it was determined that an additional iteration would not increase the clarity or completeness of the structure that had emerged. Also, this process necessarily followed a

hermeneutic progression, that is, initially it was not possible to know where any element belonged in the developing template until the template was first created, but the template could not be created until the elements were first put into groupings that would reveal its structure.

Three templates are presented as the resulting organization of all the definitional ideas found in the analysis. Table 1 shows the organization of authors’ expressions of their vision of the purpose for CML; Table 2 organizes authors’ definitional ideas about the skills essential to CML; and Table 3 presents a structure of authors’ ideas about the kinds of knowledge that are essential to CML.

SHARED MEANING FOR CML?

The patterns uncovered by this critical analysis were examined in four different ways in order to generate answers to the questions that motivate this study. Those four strategies are: configuration, cupcake, contingent, and comparing constellations of types of literacies.

Configuration strategy

Each of the definitions found for CML included many ideas that extended over paragraphs – and in many cases – over pages. Their definitions were not simple one-sentence glossary type definitions; instead, authors presented a configuration of multiple ideas. This first strategy focused on looking for similarities in the sets of definitional ideas across publications. If all the authors presented the same configuration of ideas in each of the publications we examined, then the clear conclusion would be that all those authors were sharing a common meaning for CML. However, that is not what we found. To the contrary, we found that each publication presented a unique configuration.

Although the configurations were different across every publication, there were some patterns of sharing individual definitional elements that made up their configurations. For example, one author might define CML with one configuration of definitional ideas (A, B, C, R, S, and T) while another author would present a different configuration (A, X, Y, Z, R, S, U, and V). Although the definitions of CML presented in two publications might share several definitional elements (e.g., A, R, and S), their configurations are different.

Table 1. *Purposes expressed for CML*

I. Change the institution of education	
A. Curriculum Design	
<i>When designing a CML curriculum as well as each component, designers must:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * avoid instituting a top-down program of media literacy imposed from above on teachers, with fixed texts, curricula, and prescribed materials (Kellner, 1998) * reject the belief that the purpose of education is to objectively expose students to all ideas (Sholle & Denski, 1995; 1997) * liberate students and teachers from the banking concept of education as the traditional and oppressive system of education similar to an act of depositing, in which the students are depositories and the teacher is the depositor (Freire, 1970) * preserve and reinforce individualism (Kellner & Share, 2005) * enable teachers and students to constitute their own curricula to engage material and topics of current concern and to address their own interests (Kellner, 1998) * reconstruct the institution of education democratically by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - instilling a belief that education should develop a critical consciousness about the public good (Thevenin & Mihailidis, 2012) - re-politicizing media literacy education (Kellner & Share 2005) - transforming literacy education into an exploration of the ideological role of language and communication (Kellner & Share, 2007) * create an epistemological shift from a psychological to a social approach to literacy by going beyond the traditional or normative approach to literacy that recognizes that popular culture and media are regarded as a key influence on people's lives and shaping of their identity (Robinson, Allen-Handy & Burrell-Craft, 2021) * resist the dominant ways of thinking about ethnic and gender identity (Robinson, Allen-Handy & Burrell-Craft, 2021) * move beyond media arts approach that focuses on teaching students the technical skills to merely reproduce hegemonic representations with little awareness of ideological implications or any type of critical social critique (Kellner & Share, 2007) * adopt a critical approach to education, one that forces educators and students to engage with the ways in which identity and power influence the production, dissemination, and interpretation of media (Higdon, 2022) * challenge the discourse of power relations that are an entrenched set of beliefs and values that express what is acceptable and not acceptable (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). * give people in marginalized positions the opportunity to collectively struggle against oppression to voice their concerns and create their own representations (Kellner & Share, 2007) * break down artificial distinctions that have built up in American educational system over the past 300 years that highlight differences between work and pleasure, classroom and playground, in-school and out-of school literacies, and mind and body (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000) * disrupt the traditional norm that pedagogy is apolitical by challenging normalized knowledge structures (Bhatia, 2018; Marlatt, 2020; Thomas 2018) * respect that media culture is so polymorphous, multivalent, and polysemic that it necessitates sensitivity to different readings, interpretations, and perceptions of the complex images, scenes, narratives, meanings, and messages (Kellner & Share, 2005) * adopt a multiliteracy pedagogy that promotes equity and access, that hosts and heals (Kersch & Lesley, 2019) * adapt new computer technologies to education (Kellner, 1998) * avoid being either a fan (too positive) or a censor (too negative) (Kellner & Share, 2007) * transform the way people learn (New Media Consortium, 2005)

B. Instructional Activities <i>Change the nature of instructional activities by:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * minimizing lecture-based instruction (Moorhouse & Brooks, 2020) * de-emphasizing written reports in favor of continual verbal interactions (Moorhouse & Brooks, 2020) * moving beyond technical production skills or relativist art appreciation to also include cultural studies and critical pedagogy in order to address issues of gender, race, class, and power (Kellner & Share, 2007) * engaging in more alternative media production (Kellner & Share, 2007) * making learning more experiential, hands-on, creative, expressive, and fun (Kellner & Share, 2007) * moving beyond technical production skills or relativist art appreciation to also include cultural studies and critical pedagogy in order to address issues of gender, race, class, and power (Kellner & Share, 2007) * creating opportunities for setting and reviewing personal norms/standards for young learners (Moorhouse & Brooks, 2020) * giving students the opportunity to engage in “coming to voice” which feminists explain is important for people who have seldom been allowed to speak for themselves (Collins, 2004; Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1997) * focusing more on teaching beliefs in order to move beyond the ambiguous, non-partisan stance of mainstream ML education that waters down the transformative potential for media education to become a powerful tool to challenge oppression and strengthen democracy (Kellner & Share, 2007)
C. Role of Instructors <i>Teachers must be willing to:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * avoid dogmatic orthodoxy and undemocratic pedagogy (Kellner & Share, 2007) * be open and experimental in order to move beyond well-established print-oriented pedagogy (Kellner, 1998) * use a more dialectical approach to media literacy that better engages students’ interests and concerns (Kellner, 1998) * recognize that students are often more media savvy, knowledgeable, and immersed in media culture than their teachers and can contribute to the educational process through sharing their ideas, perceptions, and insights (Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005) * be willing to use a collaborative approach with students because students are deeply absorbed in media culture and may know more about some of its artifacts and domains than their teachers (Kellner, 1998) * take seriously what students take seriously, to read what students read, to watch what students watch (Kellner, 1998) * be sensitive in criticizing artifacts and perceptions that students hold dear (Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005) * learn to love pop culture (Kellner, 1998)
D. Partnership <i>Both instructors and students must be willing to work together as they:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * regard the roles of teachers and students as a false dichotomy, that is, teachers are thought of as the active knowledge organizers and providers of information, whereas students are knowledge takers (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000) * engage in watching television shows and films together in order to promote productive discussions they reveal a variety of interpretations of media texts (Kellner & Share, 2005) * engage in continual a dialogue and mutual learning while being posed with problems related to themselves the world and the self-world relationship (Freire, 1970) * allow everyone to teach and everyone to learn (Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005; Kersch & Lesley, 2019; Luke 2012)
E. Role of Students <i>Students must be willing to:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * be moved into a ‘transitional realm’ so that new experiences can delimit the normative categories of identification arbitrarily imposed by the structures of power (Bhatia, 2017) * speak, discuss, and intervene in the teaching/learning process (Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005) * engage in participatory, collaborative projects with teachers and parents (Kellner & Share, 2005)
F. Outcome Assessment <i>Change how outcomes are assessed by:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * moving away from simply training students to give the right answer, and instead encourage action and showing students how to design their social futures (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough & Gee, 1996; Kersch & Lesley, 2019) * rejecting the drive to find the “correct” interpretation of a text because when students bring to bear aspects of race, class, and gender on their own interpretations of the text, there arise “multiple and competing perspectives that cannot guarantee one correct textual interpretation (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000)

II. Change individuals	
A. Skills Development <i>Increase the skills of individuals by teaching them how to:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * see through the facets of media that may have been uncritically absorbed (Bhatia, 2018) * analyze the dominant ideology and an interrogation of the means of production (Butler, n.d.) * distance themselves from their immediate knowledge structures, community networks and media circles in order to revisit the truths invested with the existence of a normalized stable society (Bhatia, 2017) * reject the dominant discourses represented in media (Thevenin, 2020)
B. Protect <i>Protect people from the dangers of mass media by:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * inoculating young people against the effects of media addiction and manipulation by cultivating a taste for book literacy, high culture, and the values of truth and beauty (Kellner & Share, 2005; Postman, 1985, 1992; Wright, 2020)
C. Empower <i>Empower people to use the media for their own purposes by:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * developing critical autonomy which is the critical questioning of media outside of the classroom and away from educators (Masterman, 1994) * developing a sense of agency and activism (Haddix, Garcia, & Price-Dennis, 2016; Marlatt, 2020) * developing a critical consciousness (Thevenin & Mihailidis, 2012) * developing an aesthetic appreciation for different forms of media (Wright, 2020) * constructing their own meaning of media messages then expressing those meanings in their own voices (Kellner & Share 2005) * engaging in more creative self-expression (Wright, 2020) * preserving and enhancing the natural as well as social and cultural worlds (Kellner, 1998) * using the media in new ways in order to become more socially active by participating more in a social life (Kellner & Share, 2005; 2007) * engaging in informed social activism (Thevenin & Mihailidis, 2012) * building a personal and community level consciousness (Wharf-Higgins & Begoray, 2012)
III. Change the institution of society	
<i>CML tries to improve the quality of a democratic society by:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * helping everyone become better citizens (Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007) * developing a higher level of informed, reflective, and engaged participants (Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007; NAMLE, 2007) * cultivating a sense of critical solidarity (Ferguson, 2001) * increasing civic engagement, which will lead to an informed social activism (Kellner & Share 2005, 2007; Thevenin & Mihailidis, 2012) * invigorating democratic debate and participation (Kellner & Share 2005) * increasing access to all media for everyone to make sure that youth of all classes, races, genders, and regions gain access to new technology, receiving training in media and computer literacy skills in order to provide the opportunities to enter the high-tech job market and society of the future, and to prevent an exacerbation of class, gender, and race inequalities (Kellner, 1998) * engaging in transformative politics (Thevenin & Mihailidis, 2012) * engaging in citizenship, which is exhibited by making informed, healthy and productive decisions in all areas of their lives (Wharf-Higgins & Begoray, 2012) * developing a desire to be civically engaged with real issues in the world” (Haddix, Garcia & Price-Dennis, 2016; Marlatt, 2020) * embracing ideology critique and the politics of representation (Kellner & Share, 2007)

Therefore, it would be premature to conclude that there was no sharing of meaning across publications just because no publication used the exact same configuration as did another publication.

Cupcake strategy

A second strategy focused on comparing individual definitional elements across publications. By looking at the number of citations for each of the 172 definitional elements, it was possible to identify which elements were being shared and how widespread that sharing was. We considered that although the configurations were very different across publications, perhaps there was a set of a few definitional ideas that frequently appeared in most, if not all publications. We refer to this as the cupcake strategy where we metaphorically treat the meaning of CML as a cupcake. If we were able to find the widespread use of a few definitional elements, then these could be regarded as the recipe for the cake part of the cupcake; the other non-shared ideas could be regarded as adornments, such as icing, sprinkles, and other toppings. Thus, each cupcake would look unique if the toppings were dissimilar, but underneath, the cake part might be the same if the same recipe (set of elements) was consistently used. This metaphor provides a way to think about how it could be possible for definitions across publications to be sharing some meaning even though they look so different from one another.

To test for this cupcake explanation, we searched for definitional elements that had multiple citations in Tables 1 through 3 and found that the maximum number of citations that any definitional element accumulated was six. Two definitional elements are attributed to six publications; three appear in four publications; nine appear in three publications; and 29 ideas appear in two publications. The remaining 129 definitional ideas – over three quarters – were mentioned in only one publication. While the cupcake strategy was able to find more evidence of sharing ideas across publications compared to the findings from the configuration strategy, the extent of sharing is too limited to conclude that there are any widely shared definitional elements. Thus, these findings provide no support for a commonly used recipe; instead, the definitions are almost all icing.

Contingent strategy

The third strategy for examining the possibility of a commonly shared meaning for CML focused on looking

for the degree of agreement (number of citations) across categories. If some categories exhibited a higher degree of sharing than other categories, then agreement would be found to be contingent on category. We conducted this contingent analysis first at the template level (Tables 1 through 3), then at the category level and the sub-category level within each template.

Purposes for CML. Table 1 shows that authors contributed the 71 ideas about the purpose of CML in their definitions. Of these 71 ideas, 14 (20%) were found to be shared (mentioned in more than one publication). These purposes were organized into three sub-categories: Change the institution of education, change the institution of society, and change individuals. The sub-category that includes the largest number of ideas is change the institution of education, which accounted for more than two-thirds of all the purpose ideas. Of the 47 ideas in this sub-category, 7 (17%) were shared. Within the sub-category of change the institution of society, 4 ideas (40%) were shared; and within the sub-category of change individuals, 3 (21%) were shared.

Skills elements of CML. Table 2 shows that authors contributed 54 ideas about the importance of skills in their definitions of CML, and 22 (41%) of those ideas were shared (mentioned in more than one publication). These ideas about skills were organized into seven sub-categories of the skills of exposure, information processing, meaning construction, message production, social, reflection, and appreciation. The sub-category of information processing skills included 26 ideas of which 14 (54%) were shared; meaning construction included 8 ideas with 3 (38%) shared; and message production included 10 ideas with 3 (30%) being shared.

Knowledge elements of CML. Table 3 shows that there were 47 ideas expressed about the importance of knowledge to the CML approach to media education. Of these 47, 7 (13%) were mentioned in only one publication. This knowledge component was divided into two sub-categories of knowledge about the media and knowledge about the world. Within the sub-category of knowledge about the media, 19% of ideas were shared, while within the sub-category of knowledge about the world, 7% of ideas were shared. The conclusion that arises from using this level strategy is that while proportionality of sharing is larger at more specific levels, that proportion never gets much above 50%. This is indeed a low proportion especially when we consider that the criterion for sharing was set at such a minimal level (i.e., a definitional element need only appear in two publications).

Table 2. *Definitional elements of CML: Component of skills*

1. Media Exposure Skills	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ability to access media messages (Alliance for a Media Literate America, n.d.; Kellner, 1998; Kersch & Lesley, 2019; Wharf-Higgins & Begoray, 2012) * Ability to access messages selectively (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Kellner & Share, 2005; Wright, 2020) * Ability to navigate the many pleasures and pitfalls from mass media and popular culture (Wright, 2020)
2. Information Processing Skills	
2.1. Analysis Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ability to decode elements <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - uncover the meanings that have been embedded in media messages (Alliance for a Media Literate America, n.d.; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005; Luke, 1994; New Media Consortium, 2005) - recognize media codes and conventions (Bergstrom et al, 2019; Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007)
2.2. Patterning Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ability to perceive patterns by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - using multiple perspectives when identifying meanings in media messages, in the cultural industries, and in popular culture (Thevenin, 2020) - recognizing structures of oppression (Kellner & Share 2005) - understanding how socio-political issues of race, culture, gender, class, and power are framed (Luke, 1994; Romero Walker, 2021) - recognizing how media messages are products of social production and struggle (Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005) - perceiving relationships between media and audiences, information, and power (Kellner & Share (2007, p. 4) - recognizing the power of the media (Kellner & Share, 2007; Willis, 2010) - recognizing how the dominant discourses represented in media (Thevenin, 2020) - recognizing voice and what the voice says about feminism (Luke, 1994) - recognizing how the media and messages warp, suppress, and mobilize civic participation (Thomas, 2018)
2.3. Evaluation Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ability to evaluate media messages (Alliance for a Media Literate America, n.d.; Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005; Wharf-Higgins & Begoray, 2012) * Ability to make judgments about the accuracy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - of claims in media messages (Currie & Kelly, 2022) - of the meanings presented in media messages (New Media Consortium, 2005) - of the portrayals of stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, (Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007; Masterman, 1994) - of media representations and discourses (Kellner & Share, 2005) * Ability to critique: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - media texts (Kersch & Lesley, 2019) - media representations and discourses (Kellner, 1998) - ideologies in media texts (Kellner & Share, 2007; Romero Walker, 2021) - popular culture and the cultural industries by using multiple perspectives on issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, and power (Kellner & Share, 2007; Thevenin, 2020) - mainstream approaches to literacy (Kellner & Share, 2007; Thevenin, 2020) * Ability to challenge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - meanings in media messages (Kellner & Share, 2007; Masterman, 1994) - the dominant discourses represented in media (Bhatia, 2017; Thevenin, 2020) - the structures of oppression (Kellner & Share 2005) - common-sense assumptions, which in turn leads to alternative media arts production with counter-hegemonic interpretations (Kellner & Share, 2007) - media critically in order to expose the structures of oppression (Kellner & Share, 2007)

3. Meaning Construction Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ability to interpret one's own meaning of media texts (Bhatia, 2017; Wharf-Higgins & Begoray, 2012) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - by interpreting the multiple meanings in media texts (Bergstrom et al, 2019; Kellner & Share, 2007) - by using discourse critique in order to create alternative readings (Luke, 1994; Wharf-Higgins & Begoray, 2012) - by paying attention to power relationships that form the foundation for claims (Currie & Kelly, 2022) - by using their understanding of the world around them as context (Kunnath & Jackson, 2019) - by being sensitive to different readings, interpretations, and perceptions of the media's complex images, scenes, narratives, meanings, and messages (Kellner, 1998). * Ability to resist media manipulation (Kellner & Share, 2005) * Ability to use and act on information received (Wharf-Higgins & Begoray, 2012)
4. Message Production Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ability to communicate with others using media (Alliance for a Media Literate America, n.d.; Kellner, 1998) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - to produce one's own multimedia texts (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Luke, 1999a; Wright, 2020) - to use various media technologies as instruments of self-expression and creation (Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005; Kersch & Lesley, 2019; Wharf-Higgins & Begoray, 2012) - to engage in communication interactively (New Media Consortium, 2005) - to engage in self-expression creatively (Kellner & Share, 2007) * Ability to produce messages that are alternatives to typical meanings (Bhatia, 2017; Kellner & Share, 2007; Kersch & Lesley, 2019; New Media Consortium, 2005; Thevenin, 2020; Willis, 2010) * Ability to create media messages that can: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - persuade (Willis, 2010) - evoke emotional responses (New Media Consortium, 2005) - create social activism and social change (Kellner & Share, 2005) - manipulate and transform digital media (Willis, 2010)
5. Social Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ability to participate in social life with more competence (Kellner & Share, 2005; Wharf-Higgins & Begoray, 2012) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - use media to relate and get along with a variety of individuals (Kellner, 1998) - delineate proper and improper individual and social behavior (Kellner, 1998)
6. Skills of Reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ability to reflect upon: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - pleasures derived from mass media and popular culture (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Wharf-Higgins & Begoray, 2012) - one's own multimedia texts (Wright, 2020)
7. Skills of Appreciation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Ability to appreciate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - aesthetic qualities of media (Kellner, 1998; Kellner & Share, 2005) - one's cultural heritage, histories, and contributions of a diversity of groups (Kellner, 1998)

Table 3. *Definitional elements of CML: Components of knowledge*

Knowledge about the Media	
1. About Media Industries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Understand the economic nature of the media <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the role that media play, both positively and problematically, in shaping social thought (Baker-Bell, Stanbrough & Everett, 2017) - how the media are organized to gain profit and/or power (Kellner & Share, 2005; Masterman, 2001) - how the factors of ownership, production, and distribution work together (Butler, n.d.) - how information, power, media, and ideology are inextricably linked (Kellner & Share, 2007) - how identity and power influence the production, dissemination, and interpretation of media (Higdon, 2022) * Understand organizational dynamics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - how the power dynamic between media producers and consumers is in constant interaction (Thevenin & Mihailidis, 2012) - how identity and power influence the production, dissemination, and interpretation of media (Higdon, 2022) - how media workers interpret cultural texts differently, depending on their interests and positioning in various social and historical contexts (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000) - how technology is a site for struggle where offline and online power structures created by individuals, institutions, and organizations collide (Kersch & Lesley, 2019) - how the social, political, and economic contexts are used to decide which messages get produced and disseminated (Bergstrom et al, 2019) - how the media determine which stories and messages are aimed at which audiences (Butler, n.d.)
2. About Media Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * All media messages are constructed (Kellner & Share, 2005; Masterman, 1989, 2001) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - using a creative language with its own rules (Kellner & Share, 2005; Masterman, 2001) - influenced by the values of the authors (Kellner & Share, 2005) * Media messages exhibit embedded values and points of view (Kellner & Share, 2005; Masterman, 2001) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - how issues of ideology, bodies, power, and gender produce various cultural artifacts (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000)
3. About Media Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * People are constantly being influenced by the meanings in media messages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - media construct meanings, influence and educate audiences, and impose their messages and values (Kellner & Share, 2005; Willis, 2010) - media create and maintain a dominant rationality (Bhatia, 2017) - different people experience the same media message differently (Kellner & Share, 2005; Masterman, 2001) - media can be used positively to teach a wide range of topics, like multicultural understanding and education (Kellner & Share, 2005) - television has attained the power to influence viewers because it controls the attention, time, and cognitive habits (Postman, 1985) - people are being conditioned by media culture through the use of tailored advertising platforms, predatory websites and search engines (Kersch & Lesley, 2019) * The process of influence is complex, indirect and operates through many factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - media effects are contextualized within their social and historical dynamics then issues of ideology are extremely useful to media education to explore the interconnections (Ferguson, 1998, 2004). - truths and realities operate through a set of formative technologies, texts, practices, and institutions (Bhatia, 2017) - ideology, power, and sociocultural context shape media messages and representations (Higdon, 2022) - the process is frequently invisible and unconscious ways (Kellner & Share, 2005) - media exert a key influence on people's lives by shaping their identities (Robinson et al, 2021)

4. About the media culture	<p><i>CML approach to media education requires the transmission of knowledge that media culture:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * is complex and challenging (Kellner, 1998) * is composed of popular culture texts that function to produce certain relations of power and gendered identities that students may learn to use or resist as part of their everyday school experiences (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000) * provides significant statements or insights about the social world, empowering visions of gender, race, and class or complex aesthetic structures and practices, thereby putting a positive spin on how it can provide significant contributions to education (Kellner & Share, 2005) * can advance sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice, as well as misinformation, problematic ideologies, and questionable values, accordingly promoting a dialectical approach to the media (Kellner & Share, 2005) * draws its theoretical concepts from the wider and considerably deeper realms of critical theory and cultural studies (such as the Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools) (Higdon, 2022)
Knowledge about the World	
<i>CML approach to media education requires the transmission of knowledge about the world</i>	
1. Factual Knowledge	<p><i>CML approach to media education requires the transmission of factual knowledge:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * about contemporary societies (Kellner, 1998) * about the cultural heritage of minority and oppressed groups (Kellner & Share, 2005) * about science, nature, and the human body (Kellner, 1998) * about the threats to the environment, and the need to preserve and enhance the natural as well as social and cultural worlds (Kellner, 1998)
2. Contextual Knowledge	<p><i>CML approach to media education requires the transmission of contextual knowledge about:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * values and norms (Kellner, 1998) * a new grammar with its own rules of construction (New Media Consortium, 2005) * how society and politics are structured and work to one's advantage or disadvantage (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000) * how certain groups have been marginalized from the mainstream (Kellner & Share, 2005)
3. Knowledge about Processes	<p><i>CML approach to media education requires the transmission of knowledge about media processes about:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * the ways in which information, power, media and ideology are inextricably linked (Kellner & Share, 2007; Masterman, 1994) * how issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, and power interact (Thevenin, 2020) * the naturalizing processes of ideology and the interrelationships with social injustice (Kellner & Share, 2007) * the importance of communication modes in political participation (Thevenin & Mihailidis, 2012) * the value the aesthetic qualities of media and the arts (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000) * what may appear natural in a media-saturated environment might be a false construction created by the media (Hoeschsmann & Poyntz, 2012) * how the audience is active in the process of making meaning, as a cultural struggle between dominant readings, encompassing oppositional readings or negotiated readings (Kellner & Share, 2007)

Comparing constellations of types of literacies

The fourth strategy took a more macro approach by comparing authors' perceptions for how CML fits into a constellation of literacies. With this strategy, the degree of sharing is evidenced by the extent to which authors perceive the same literacies as well as arrange them in the same configuration, especially the position of CML within those configurations.

This strategy identified seven publications where authors provided their perceptions about which types of literacies were important to media education and how their idea of CML fit into these configurations of literacies. As Table 4 shows, none of these seven publications present the same set of literacies. Authors of these seven publications named 18 different types of literacies including CML. While there are examples of the same type of literacy showing up in more than one list, none of the 18 types of literacy appear in more than three of the seven lists.

Even in the three-article progression started by Kellner in 1998, there are differences that raise troubling issues about the stability of expressed meanings. In the first of these three publications, Kellner argued that there were seven types of literacies with CML co-existing with the other six. Several years later, he (Kellner & Share, 2005) argued that there were four types of literacies: Multimedia literacy had become plural; cultural literacy had become multicultural literacy; and both social literacy and ecoliteracy had been dropped. Also, he was now arguing that CML was an umbrella concept that included the ideas of four other types of literacy. Then two years later, he presented the same argument that CML was a collection of ideas from other literacies, but there were now five of them (Kellner & Share, 2007). Computer literacy presumably had been sub-divided into information literacy and technical literacy; multimedia literacies was transformed into multimodal literacy; and multicultural literacy was dropped. Although his main point that CML was a broad umbrella that could pull together all the ideas from individual types of literacies was consistent in his later two publications, the fact that he presented three very different perceptions of the existing configurations of literacies without explanation makes it very difficult to interpret whether his conceptualizations of literacies had changed or if the difference in terminology should be regarded as his use of synonyms.

The next three publications listed in Table 4 also present CML as an umbrella concept that incorporates the ideas from many different types of literacies.

However, there is a different set of literacies displayed in each of those three publications.

Table 4. *Configurations of Literacies as Perceived by CML Scholars*

Authors	Literacies
Kellner (1998)	critical media literacy print literacy computer literacy multimedia literacy cultural literacy social literacy ecoliteracy
Kellner and Share (2005)	print literacy computer literacy multimedia literacies multicultural literacy
Kellner and Share (2007)	print literacy media literacy information literacy technical literacy multimodal literacy
Wright (2020)	informational literacy technical literacy new literacies: - new media, - new literacies - new media literacies - media literacy - critical media literacy - participatory media
Critical Media Literacy Project (n.d.)	news literacy visual literacy information literacy digital literacy technology and platform literacy data literacy
New Media Consortium (2005)	digital literacy visual literacy new media literacy
Thevenin (2020)	critical media literacy creative media literacy

There are also other scholars who have created terms for additional kinds of literacy as they introduced their ideas about CML. For example, Connolly and Readman (2017) introduced what they called "Creative Media Literacy" with the argument that CML requires the field to extend its emphasis on "creation" as a core component of media literacy, which they define as "a critically oriented set of attributes with which students

practice a systematic interrogation of their own productive processes and the meanings attributed to them” (p. 245). Also, Ajayi (2013) presented the idea of “new literacies” as referring to a wide variety of competencies ranging from crowd-sourcing information and determining social influence to navigating social networks. Ajayi explains that “learning to maneuver through and determine the influence, legitimacy, and interactive tendencies of various new media technologies and their impact on personal, social, and political relationships through such means as ‘the Internet, video, websites, social network media, iPhone, and iPad’ falls comfortably within the purview of new literacies” (Ajayi, 2013, p. 173).

CONCLUSION

Even with the use of multiple strategies, this critical analysis of publications about CML has been unable to find more than a minor degree of sharing of meaning for CML across authors. There was not a single example of a configuration of definitional elements appearing in as many as two publications. As for the 172 individual definitional elements, three quarters appeared in only one publication and none of them was cited in as many as seven publications. The clear conclusion from this critical analysis is that there are far more differences than similarities in the way authors express what they mean by CML. Therefore, the answer to the question “Do authors who present their definitions for CML exhibit a commonly shared meaning?” is clearly no.

Implications

The findings generated by this critical analysis raise some troubling concerns about the viability of CML as an area of scholarship. Some of these concerns lead to questions about the nature of a scholarly community where its members do not share the same meaning for the community’s most important idea. Another set of concerns raise questions about the value of this literature to various publics. But before we lay out those implications, we need to express a caveat.

Scholars who are committed to a critical perspective on media literacy are likely to have a mindset where they perceive many more similarities, in contrast to differences, in their literature. Therefore, these scholars might regard our findings as being misleading because of the emphasis on differences across the many definitional elements that have been used to define CML.

To address this concern, we point out that every definitional element we identified in our analysis exhibits multiple characteristics – some of which indicate sharing of meaning with other definitional elements and some of which are unique and therefore indicate differences from other definitional elements. The combination of differences and similarities across all those definitional elements is what made the displays in the tables possible to construct. While the tables look like they focus exclusively on differences by separating the definitional elements into groups, those groupings also reveal similarities in the sense that all definitional elements within a grouping all share a common characteristic that is reflected in the name of the grouping. To illustrate, Table 1 displays all the definitional ideas that share a similarity of all dealing with purpose. Within that overall shared characteristic of a concern over purpose, there are three categories as delineated by type of purpose (change the institution of education, change individuals, and change the institution of society). While these categories themselves highlight differences in definitional elements, each category contains multiple definitional elements that all exhibit a similarity.

The question arises: Why did we choose to focus the presentation of our findings on the differences rather than on the similarities? Our answer is: Because the differences are much more salient than the similarities in the literature. It is possible that all authors who write about CML share a general meaning, but if so, they rarely express it. If there were a commonly shared meaning, and all authors who wrote about CML showcased that meaning in their articles, then this similarity would be salient, and it would be misleading to focus primarily on differences. But we did not find any evidence for a widespread usage of a common meaning. Authors typically reveal their meaning for CML by presenting a list of details that represent their meaning as a configuration. When we look at those configurations across articles, the differences are salient. And because it is the perception of differences that would overwhelm readers as they struggle through more and more of this literature, there are some serious implications for this perception on various publics, especially for readers and for media education, as well as on the scholarly community.

For readers

The motivation for students and scholars to read a literature of some area new to them is to learn why that

area is important and what that area has created that can be of value to them as readers. Anyone who reads any of the publications that were analyzed in this study will be rewarded with a great deal of detail that illuminates the authors' vision about what CML is and why it is important. People who are impressed with the ideas they encounter and want to learn more about CML will attempt to read more of the literature, but this additional reading will likely create more confusion than clarity as readers notice that each publication presents another configuration of many ideas. Furthermore, the ideas that appear to be important in one publication are likely to be backgrounded or – more likely – ignored in other publications.

Seasoned readers expect to experience efficiencies as they increase the amount of reading on a topic as they become more familiar with the topic's key terms. But with the CML literature, additional reading increases rather than decreases the effort needed to read each additional publication. The only option to achieve efficiency for readers of the CML literature is to read only one publication and simply accept the ideas expressed there as a representation of what the entire area is. While this shortcut to understand the area would deliver great efficiency to the reader, its effect would be to balkanize the area into many niches each with its own echo chamber that reinforces its own narrow perspective. And this condition would make it even more difficult to regard all this activity as evidence of a community.

Media education

Perhaps the most important public to the scholars working in the area of CML is media education. Almost all the publications in the CML literature advocate for some kind of change to the current practices in media education. These suggested changes present exciting visions that appear to deliver obvious improvement to media education. However, when we critically analyze these pedagogical prescriptions, we can see that they are not developed in enough depth to recognize the significant barriers that have been preventing recommendations like these from being already implemented.

While it is exciting to read these prescriptions and imagine the utopian educational systems they envision, those pedagogical prescriptions seem to have little practical value given the realities of limited resources and bureaucratic practices that have been reinforced over decades. One example of this is the advocating for

the teaching of beliefs that are alternatives to the beliefs that people are likely to acquire from continual exposure to patterns of meaning in media messages (Ferguson, 1998, 2004; Kellner, 1998; Higdon, 2022; Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007; Robinson, et al., 2021). These scholars focus on what alternative beliefs should be taught, they rarely consider their practical implications and the resistance they will trigger. One exception is Thomas (2018) who recognizes that advocating the introduction of beliefs into the educational system can trigger all kinds of resistance. His response to this barrier is to point out that pedagogical practices are always political so that the issue is not whether or not to teach beliefs but which beliefs to teach. While that is an important insight, it does nothing to reduce the resistance; it simply shifts the focus from a foundationless argument (yes, beliefs are interlaced in all educational activities) to an argument about which beliefs should be taught.

Other pedagogical recommendations are likely to encounter even more significant barriers that would prevent their implementation. For example, many CML scholars argue that media education needs to do more than simply teach alternative beliefs and instead teach students how to construct alternative beliefs on their own (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, & Gee, 1996; Collins, 2004; Freire, 1970; Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1997; Higdon, 2022; Kersch & Lesley, 2019; Moorhouse & Brooks, 2020). At first, this might seem to be a relatively simple change to make, but when we examine it in any depth, we find that there are profound implications for student assessment of performance, the role of the teacher, teacher training.

As for the assessing the of quality of instruction, the current model of assessment is based on convergence, which measure success by counting how many correct answers each student selects on an objective type test (multiple choice answers and true-false) because those tests are based on the assumption that there is one – and only one – correct answer and that it does not matter how the student arrived at each answer, only that the student's answers match the test designer's expert sanctioning of answers. But if the purpose of education is shifted toward students thinking for themselves, then there is never just one correct answer. Also, quality is reflected not in the outcomes as much as in the process of thinking that led each student to their differing interpretations. Measuring the process of thinking is much more difficult to measure.

The role of the teacher must shift from that of an expert dispensing facts to that of a coach who must work

individually with each student to determine their skill level then motivate them to work at each increasing challenge. This means that teacher training cannot be information based but instead must train candidates to develop the practices that are required for good coaching. Making such changes to refocus the nature of teacher training would require a momentous effort along with a significant increase in resources.

While the pedagogical prescriptions presented in publications about CML stimulate exciting visions for change, the gap between those utopian visions and the realities of current media education is huge. If these scholars intend to make a meaningful contribution, they need to focus much less on fantasy visions and much more on closing the gap by building a bridge of pedagogical prescriptions that offer practical advice about how to overcome all the many barriers that protect the status quo from change.

Scholarly community

The purpose of a scholarly community is to examine a particular phenomenon and generate knowledge that is useful not just for the scholars within that community but also for publics outside that community. Without such a purpose, the community becomes insular like medieval scholasticism where it expends all its resources debating issues that can never be resolved and are of interest only to be people inside the community (e.g., arguing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin) (Hesse, 1949).

Is it possible to regard scholars who publish their ideas about CML as a community? If we regard a scholarly community as a collection of scholars who share an interest in studying a particular phenomenon (in this case a critical media literacy approach to media education), then it is possible to conclude that the authors cited in this critical analysis have formed a community as evidenced by their widespread use of the same term (CML) to label their approach to media education. Also, these scholars share a belief that the ML approach to media education has been too limited and that a CML is a different approach that incorporates all the ideas of ML while adding a critical perspective (e.g., Ajayi, 2013; Connolly & Readman, 2017; Kellner & Share, 2005; 2007; Thevenin & Mihailidis, 2012). While this argument itself is clear and widely shared, what is not clear, nor shared, is a meaning for “critical.” The word “critical” has been used to mean many different things such as engaging in a careful analysis; an inclination to find fault by judging things too

severely; making value judgments (good as well as bad) about something; digging into what is assumed to be true then advocating a change; and focusing on what is most important while backgrounding the less important. All of this variation of meaning shows up in how “critical” has been used in CML publications, and much of this variation can be explained by the differences in authors’ backgrounds (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). As for illustrations of these differences in meanings, Alvermann and Hagood explain that cultural studies scholars regard “critical” as an approach referring to how society and politics are structured in ways that work to the advantage of elites who use media narratives to create and maintain an ideology that secures their power. Scholars writing from a postmodern perspective use “critical” to refer to how differences in the interpretation of cultural texts arise because of the way in which individuals are positioned within various social and historical contexts. From a feminist perspective, the use of “critical” refers to how popular culture texts produce gendered identities that reveal certain relations of power.

Without a widespread sharing of a common meaning for an area’s flagship term, is it possible to consider these authors as having created a scholarly community? Perhaps there are many characteristics that are shared by the people who identify with this area of scholarship. However, if such sharing of other characteristics does exist, they have not been made salient throughout the literature.

Furthermore, the vitality of a scholarly community would seem to be keyed to how well its members engage with the ideas of their fellow members, that is, how well they communicate with one another. Within the area of CML, scholars appear to be *talking at one another* or *past one another* as demonstrated by the finding that each publication presents its own configuration of ideas. There is little evidence of a scholarly dialog where scholars challenge one another to examine their meanings, to debate the relative importance of different ideas, and negotiate an evolving synthesis of meanings that incorporates the best ideas in a set that captures a deeply embedded sense of meaning that they all share. Performing these tasks would require real communication, that is, scholars would not just be presenting their own ideas, but they would also be listening to the ideas of others then processing that meaning in a dialog. In short, they would be engaging in a critical analysis of the ideas of other as well as their own ideas.

It is useful to think of the development of an area of scholarship as using an iterative process involving two

essential tasks. One task is to generate new ideas that become the raw materials that are used to build knowledge. A second task is the engagement of scholars in an ongoing critical analysis of the knowledge they are producing that starts with continually calibrating the value of all the different ideas that are being expressed then building toward a synthesis of those ideas into a coherent way to explain the phenomenon that defines their area of scholarship. The scholars writing about CML have focused on the first of these tasks, but have virtually ignored the second task. While CML scholars have generated many ideas that reflect a mosaic of meanings for the term (this study identified 172 of them), they have demonstrated very little interest in communicating with one another to sort through all those many ideas to make claims about which are the most important and how those ideas should be synthesized so that they work together to create an increasingly clear picture of what their area of study means. The literature of publications about CML has become cluttered with many different personal visions. What is missing is a community-wide vision that is constructed from all the personal visions. While this area of scholarship is active in generating more and more personal visions, it lacks the critical analysis of all these ideas that would move the area toward a synthesis that could clearly articulate the deep underlying meaning for CML that all the contributors might be sharing.

In conclusion, our intention for presenting these findings is to stimulate those scholars who are attracted to the topic of CML to ask themselves some important questions about the nature of community, about their practices, and about the value of their contributions. First what does community mean? Does it mean an assortment of diverse people who come together with a particular interest in order to share their ideas, engage in scholarly debate, and build toward the sharing of a common meaning that incorporates all their best ideas? Or does it mean a conglomeration of many niches each with its own meaning that unite only over the use of the CML term as a label? Second, what scholarly practices are most important? Is it increasing the diversity of ideas and avoiding the risk of offending any idea contributor by engaging in debates about which ideas are better than others? Or is it the excitement of providing an idea as a way of stimulating debate about meaning and value?

Perhaps the most important question of all is: Are CML scholars willing to go beyond conducting critical analysis of the media, media literacy, and media education and also conduct a critical analysis about the

nature of their community, the practices they take for granted, and the value they are producing?

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