

Is there a space for critical literacy in the context of social media?

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ABSTRACT: In this paper we look at what the critical tradition in education has to offer to the phenomenon of social media. Through an overview and evaluation of the approaches advocated by practitioners of critical literacy and critical media literacy, we illustrate the limitations of applying these frameworks to the fluid and densely interwoven spaces of social media. In particular we focus on the problematic nature of textual analysis and textual production as foundations for a critique of new media. By proposing a conceptual model that maps the inter-relationship between practice, identity and networks, we make a new contribution to the field, suggesting that this approach may provide a more fruitful analytical tool for educators. Drawing on the work of Greenhow and Robelia (2009), and particularly their notion of advantageous practice, we work towards a model for enabling children and young people to move from a consideration of what they do through social media to a view of what they might do. We suggest that this may be a more fruitful way of approaching social media, but one which remains faithful to the overall project of the critical tradition.

KEY WORDS: Social media, social networking, critical literacy, critical media literacy, media education, critical pedagogy.

UNPACKAGING SOCIAL MEDIA: THE CURRENT CONTEXT

The recent and rapid dissemination of new forms of digital technology has had a noticeable impact on the social and cultural lives of large sectors of the global population. Along with the infusion and availability of more interactive and user-friendly interfaces and software designs, and the increasing sophistication of affordable mobile devices, we are witnessing the emergence of ever-newer forms of popular communication. Connectivity through what have come to be known as social media is a key theme of our time. In popular and political discourse, new media are often referred to as being significant in achieving a more equitable society through increased social participation. Co-existent with this is the circulating moral panic about privacy, safety, identity theft and the rest. It is hardly surprising, then, to find that educators and literacy specialists are wrestling with how these new practices might be described and conceptualised, and how they might inform activity within schools and other institutional settings.

Arguments that social media offer some new and exciting possibilities for educators have now been well rehearsed (for example, Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Davies & Merchant, 2009; Greenhow, Robelia & Hughes, 2010). Clearly, the potential for social media to support new or extended forms of participation and collaboration that could promote learning is attractive to those who embrace student-centred ideologies, and those who believe that traditional structures of knowledge and power are

loosening. In media education, writers like Jenkins (2006) and Buckingham (2003) have explored this notion that new technologies can help to support new kinds of participation. Jenkins uses the term “participatory culture” to capture this theme, underscoring the importance of active participation and collective intelligence in youth engagement with popular media. In an influential White Paper, written for the MacArthur Foundation, Jenkins, with Purushota, Clinton, Weigel & Robinson (2006) describe a participatory culture as one in which members “believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another” (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 3). The White Paper is based on the premise that new communications technology has transformed the lives of many (but not all), and that new skills and understandings are necessary for full participation in the digital world. It argues that, because of what it calls ‘the participation gap’, these skills should be incorporated in the school curriculum.

An alternative view and one that perhaps suggests a more reflective or critical engagement with new media is found in the European Charter for Media Literacy (Euromedia, 2004). In contrast to Jenkins' model, the European Charter is more explicitly educational, describing its aims in terms of *literacies*, whilst at the same time underscoring the importance of criticality. The charter identifies three inter-related strands, often referred to as the three Cs. These are:

1. *Cultural*: broadening learners' experience of different kinds of media form and content;
2. *Critical*: developing learners' critical skills in analysing and assessing media outputs;
3. *Creative*: developing learners' creative skills in using media for expression and communication, and for participation in public debate.

Interpretations of these three Cs vary considerably, but for the current discussion we wish to draw readers' attention to the re-insertion of criticality into debates about new media literacy. Up until now, frameworks for reading and writing media texts, such as those proposed by Buckingham (2003) and Burn and Parker (2003), have provided useful guidance for many educators but questions of their relevance to new forms of social media are beginning to emerge (Hartley, 2010). If we are living in a world in which children and young people are becoming literate across a range of social media and are regular participants in online environments – and the evidence is compelling – then there is clearly a need for more work in this area. Greenhow and Robelia (2009), in their investigation of high-school students' online social networking, conclude their report by suggesting that “...educators must help students enact legal, ethical, responsible, safe and advantageous online community practices” (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009, p. 136).

In so doing they extend some familiar ideas around “internet safety” and what used to be rather charmingly referred to as “netiquette” to include the idea of *advantageous* practices. This deceptively simple idea raises important questions such as: Where is the space for the critique of social media? What practices might critique promote? How might they be advantageous to children and young people? And what value systems might be invoked?

In this paper, we respond to such questions by exploring ways of conceptualising critique in relation to social media. Given the absence of any agreed definition of

social media, we focus on “technologies that enable communication, collaboration, participation and sharing” (Hughes, 2009, p. 5), whilst at the same time accepting the observation that all media are at least in some sense, by definition, social. We suggest that increased access, ease of use and the ubiquity of these new technologies conspire to make the term *social media* useful for our purposes in considering the rapid and pervasive exchange of multimedia messages that characterise digital communication. In conceptualising our critique of social media, we begin by summarising key developments and debates in the critical tradition and go on to identify ways in which the notion of critique is problematic in the context of social media. We then present an alternative model for critique, which draws on three interconnected dimensions of engagement with social media: practice, identity and networks. This is used to suggest how we might promote advantageous practices, whilst at the same time arguing that the notion of advantageousness deserves further attention.

WHO WANTS TO BE CRITICAL?

Approaches to critique

Using the word “critical” is a popular way of modifying the description of a topic area or discipline and often involves practices or actions that aim to expose the dominant patterns of power and authority that remain hidden from view or become normalised through routine or everyday activity. The movement from critical theory into topics as diverse as critical pedagogy, critical disability studies and critical psychology mobilises this concept of criticality to signal distance from mainstream practices, to stake out a territory for alternative views, and often encompasses a progressive or radical critique of the status quo. In education the notion of critical pedagogy (Apple, 1982; Freire, 1985) has been repeatedly used to describe ways of working that aim to raise awareness of how everyday lives and actions are constructed and constrained through the apparatus of power. As a result, such work has repeatedly focused on how we are “positioned” by the dominant discourses and practices surrounding race, class, gender and sexual orientation. The goal of critical pedagogy has been variously described in terms of resistance, emancipation or reclaiming power by creating new spaces for dialogue.

For many educators, critical literacy and critical media studies have held the promise of providing a curricula space for this kind of work (for example, Luke, 1997, 2000; Buckingham, 2003; Kellner & Share, 2007). From this perspective, language, seen as central to the social construction of knowledge and consequently to how power circulates, is a prime site for the enactment of dominant discourses (Freire, 1985). Much critical literacy work has therefore focused on how texts – and the relationships they present and sustain – are patterned by power relationships, and has supplemented this through the production of new texts as a way of generating oppositional discourses through re-positioning misrepresented or under-represented social groups (Shor & Freire, 1987). Similarly, whilst interpretations of what constitutes “the critical” in relation to the media are informed by different schools of thought (Alverman & Hagood, 2000), much work in critical media literacy builds on a cultural studies perspective, with its roots in the work of the Frankfurt School. From this position, the culture industry is seen as a powerful force in reproducing dominant ideologies and, hence, a sophisticated instrument of social control. Critical media literacy work informed by this perspective is seen as an act of resistance or at least an

inoculation against media domination. For example, the work of Giroux and his collaborators has consistently argued for a critical pedagogy that might reclaim public education and cultural policy from media corporations (Giroux, 1994; Giroux & McLaren, 1994; Giroux & Pollock, 2010). From this point of view, the act of criticality involves finding “spaces” where meanings can be “re-written, produced and constructed rather than merely asserted” (Giroux, 1994, p. 90).

Critical approaches could be seen as offering much to the project of integrating social media within educational contexts; a critical perspective could be used to interrogate the competing discourses which surround social media use – around positive stories of participation and empowerment on one hand and more negative associations with consumerism, exploitation, fraud, safety and so forth on the other – and could support users’ reflections on how they and others are positioned through their social media use. However, recent debates on critical literacy and critical media literacy have touched on a series of important issues that seem to have particular implications for engaging critically with social media. We turn to these now and, in particular, to two related areas that raise questions about incorporating vernacular texts in educational contexts. We refer to these as: the colonisation of popular culture; and the institutionalisation of critique.

The colonisation of popular culture

Identifying popular culture as an area worthy of academic interest has a relatively short history. Arguably, it received its first official recognition in the work of Richard Hoggart and the foundation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University although, as Merchant (forthcoming) points out, there are other antecedents, too. But the movement to recognise and use the popular culture that children and young people participate in within the school setting is also inspired by ideas about building on their cultural capital, starting from their own experience and drawing on their expertise (see Marsh & Millard, 2000). There are a growing number of examples of adopting and extending this approach to include new media (see Carrington & Robinson, 2009, for example), yet many educators are aware of the balancing act required – a balance between building on learner interest and the danger of undermining the pleasures associated with popular pursuits by pressing them into service of more “serious” educational aims. The stakes are undeniably higher still when we use learners’ interests as a way of introducing critical engagement. Buckingham (2003) summarises this when he describes how critical media studies can easily result in “spoiling” the enjoyment of popular texts and inculcating particular “correct” or “worthy” readings, often with variable results. Rather than validating the interests of children and young people, this sort of colonisation may achieve the reverse by implying that what they enjoy is actually flawed or in some ways simply wrong. Such tensions are particularly relevant in the context of social media, given the discontinuities between social media use within and beyond school. To focus on critique without integrating social media more fully into classroom practice would be to objectify practices which may be highly significant to learners’ lives. Given that social media use is often so inter-twined with identity (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Dowdall, 2009; Merchant, 2010), such objectification may be particularly invasive and alienating for learners.

The institutionalisation of critique

The problems associated with the colonisation of popular culture feed into what could be called “the institutionalisation of critique”, in which particular approaches and particular readings of media texts are favoured, perhaps in the belief that the young will, as a result, be “safeguarded” against their supposed harmful effects – whether these effects are related to violence or anti-social behaviour, the representation of social stereotypes, or the reproduction of passive consumerism. Such approaches may assume that users are passive or undiscerning in their engagement with social media and may work to sideline the criticality inherent in their personal responses.

The danger when critique becomes institutionalised is that it becomes the new orthodoxy, and then the radical work that critical pedagogy set out to achieve is likely to lose whatever power it held in the first place. It runs the risk of being reduced to a set of favoured attitudes or worse, a number of right answers, which are unlikely to hold any transformative power as they will weigh unfavourably against the situated meanings with which learners identify. Janks (2002, p. 10) has warned against seeing the text as a representation of reality and, drawing on literary theory, has argued that meanings of texts are negotiated between readers and writers. She demonstrates how, for example, learners may find critical analysis particularly problematic when faced with texts with strong personal resonance, as such texts are removed from everyday practice and their associated situated meanings; this may sideline “the territory of desire and identification, pleasure and play, the taboo and the transgressive” (Janks, 2002, p. 10).

We can see these tensions between learners’ responses and dominant readings play out in debates around the significance of the globalised media industry. Although it is generally accepted that new media, like print texts, are powerful forces for reproducing social divisions and distinctions, there has been growing concern for how children and young people are often positioned as passive consumers in a global market. Such discourses may underplay the diverse ways in which children and young people recruit texts and resources to support their own purposes. As Dyson argues, “the culture industry is not simply a capitalist means of controlling people’s minds, nor do people use it as some pure means of self-expression and community organisation” (Dyson, 2006, pp. xviii-xix.).

Critical perspectives on new media may over-simplify the more complex interactions that play out in practice. As Luke and Carrington (2002) illustrate, for example, users often re-mix and re-contextualise available resources to reflect both dominant global discourses and more immediate local contexts resulting in what they call ‘glocalised’ literacy practices. Such work suggests that it is negotiated meaning – which sees texts as part of a network of relationships – that should be the focus of critical literacy.

Developments in critical literacy

In response to such complexity, a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between texts, audiences, information and power has emerged – and it is one that references both dominant discourses and more personalised responses. So, for example, by fusing together elements of critical pedagogy with cultural studies, Kellner and Share (2007, p. 65) propose a model for critique which identifies five basic themes or practices. These are:

1. Understanding media as the result of a process of social construction;
2. Analysing the codes and conventions through which media texts communicate;
3. Recognising how audiences negotiate meanings;
4. Exploring the relationships between representation, and ideology and power;
5. Examining the role of producers and the media industry.

Whilst such frameworks see both audiences and producers as active in meaning making, they still need careful implementation if they are to avoid the kinds of colonisation and institutionalisation described above. Janks (2010), for example, presents a model of critical literacy pedagogy that includes four dimensions: *domination* (a focus on language and power); enabling *access* to dominant discourses; the acknowledgment and facilitation of a *diversity* of discourses in classrooms through which dominant discourses may be interrogated; and *design* through which learners are supported in developing their own, often subversive or alternative, meanings. Whilst these dimensions originate in different paradigms, she argues that meaningful models of critical literacy should draw on these inter-dependently. Retaining a focus on the role of texts in sustaining power relations, Janks's framework makes space for learners' perspectives and experiences through encouraging them to draw from a range of discourses in supporting their analysis. It also emphasises the "productive power" of design (see Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) – power that is generated as learners use and select different resources to make meaning in ways that challenge, subvert or replace dominant discourses. Such work aims to position learners as active in making meaning within particular relational networks as they challenge existing power relations through new or re-worked texts. We see this, for example, in Comber and Nixon's work with colleagues and young learners in developing new textual spaces through which they engage with and "re-write" their surrounding neighbourhoods (Comber & Nixon, 2004; Nixon & Comber, 2009).

These notions of situated meanings and relational networks have particular implications for work around social media, and they are of key importance to the model of critique we present. However, they are also linked to some central difficulties in applying critique to social media contexts. These difficulties relate to the notion of text itself. Whilst critical literacy and critical media approaches have varied in how far they mediate direct or indirect engagement with social worlds and are framed by teachers' or learners' meanings, in each the *text* is seen as significant to both representing and acting upon the social and cultural context. Below, we explore why a focus on text is problematic and explore why some have consequently seen critical literacy and critical media approaches as outmoded and inappropriate in the context of social media.

CRITICALITY AND THE BOUNDLESSNESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The problem with notions of text

For a number of years, commentators have been observing how new digital and networked environments challenge traditional assumptions about the nature of the text (Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Merchant, 2007). Meaning-making in new media often lacks the fixity and boundedness of traditional print text – so, for instance, a web-page can have multiple authorship, be regularly updated or expanded,

and may be densely interconnected with other pages through hyperlinks. Readers may navigate multimodal elements in different ways and a particular page may even take on a different appearance when viewed on different screens, through different browsers, or on mobile devices such as smartphones or e-readers (Kress, 2010). In popular social media, an individual's Twitter stream will refresh in minutes, it will have a different appearance in different applications (see Figures 1 and 2), whereas Facebook updates may occur regularly and unpredictably throughout a single day. Moreover, media are situated in multiple networks and this confounds established notions of reading context and intertextuality. In sum, the very essence of textuality appears to slip through our fingers unless we attempt (as we have done here) to freeze it in time through a screenshot or print-out.

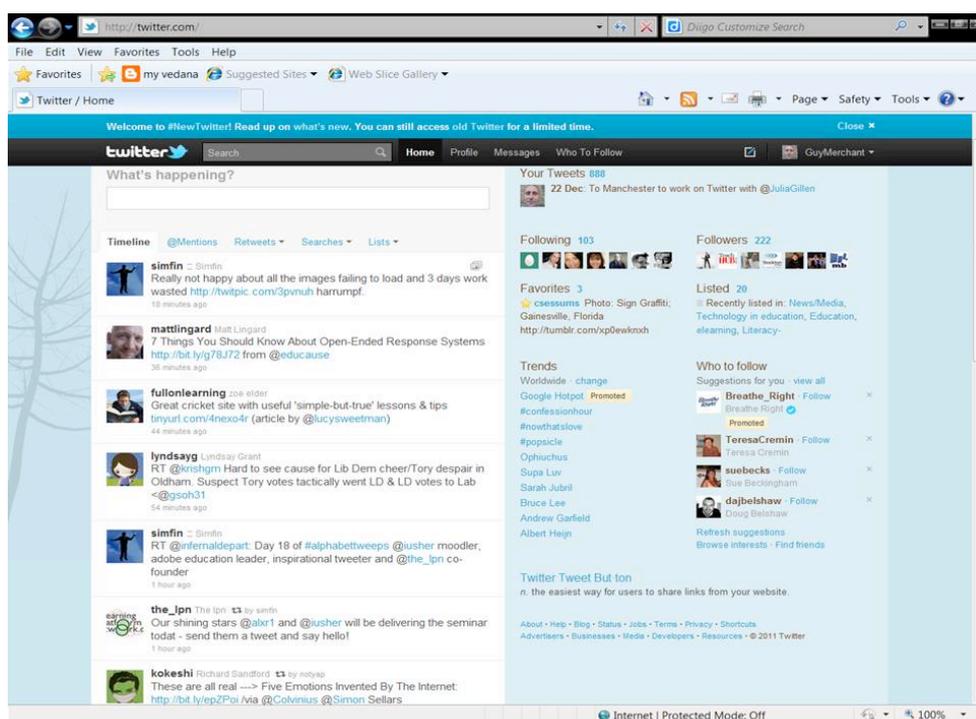


Figure 1. Twitter stream as viewed through Twitter.com

Because of this fluidity and instability, multiple meanings, readings and interpretations are a feature of digital environments and notions of positionality and ideology become much harder to pin down. As Kress suggests, the post-modern condition may be typified by the weakening or dissolution of the “stable structures and environments” that made critique possible in the first place (Kress, 2010, p. 133).

For Kress, criticality has little relevance to this fluid boundless context; furthermore, he notes how it is inevitably retrospective in focus, since it, “...aims to uncover ‘political purposes’ in the effects of past uses of power, of past rhetorical action as it is manifest in existing text” (Kress, 2010, p. 21).

If critique is about investigating and challenging positionality, then positionality itself must be identifiable and to some extent stable. Indeed, many of the most powerful examples of critical literacy have been located in contexts in which positionality is highly salient, for example, Janks’ work in South Africa or Comber and Nixon’s work with disadvantaged groups in Australia. The “instability, provisionality, fluidity”

(Kress, 2010, p. 133) of global markets and networked environments, however, means that such positionality can be elusive. For Kress, therefore, “design” supersedes criticality in enabling learners to engage actively and reflexively with new media and position themselves in multiple ways in different discourses. This obviates the need for critical literacy and its problematic associations with a fixed view of the world. Design, he argues, might usefully be complemented by a focus on ‘ethics’, which prompts users to consider values and assumptions in ways that relate to their online activity rather than to broader social structures.

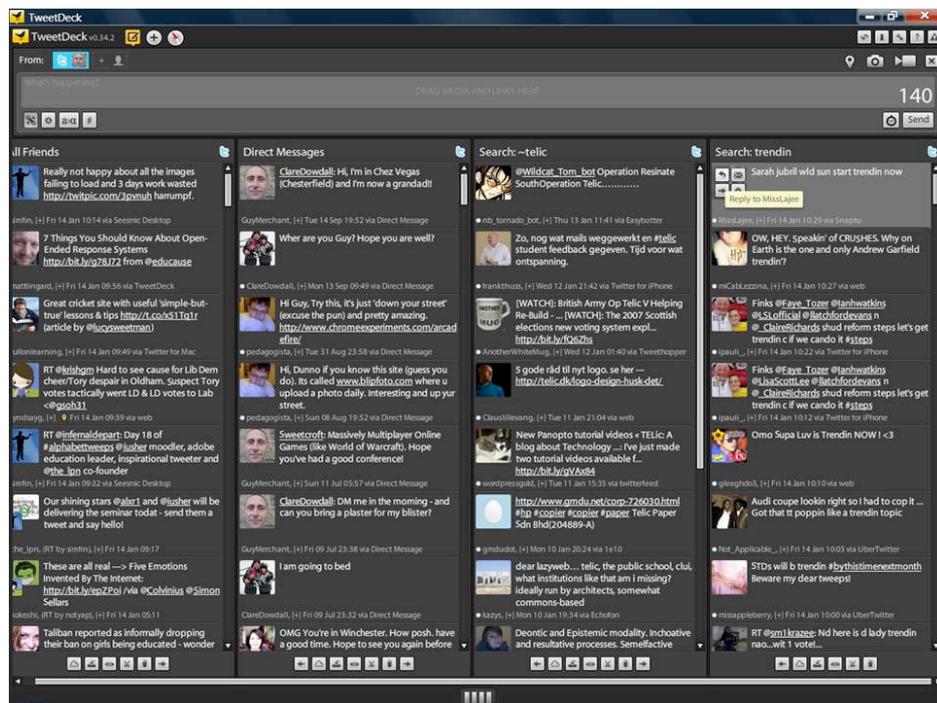


Figure 2. Twitter stream as viewed through the Tweetdeck.com application

Hartley (2010) presents a further argument for moving away from criticality. He notes how opportunities for participation and collaboration have meant that the source of knowledge has shifted from *artefacts* (such as texts) to *users* who act as knowledge-producers in deciding what to do online. He challenges the idea that power circulates through texts and instead argues that it is produced through what people choose to do:

...but these choices are not *structured* by the system, which allows ordinary people simultaneously to partake of popular entertainment and purposeful growth of knowledge, and to decide amongst themselves, peer-to-peer, what they need, rather than having to rely on providers who may have pecuniary, ideological or other ulterior motives. (Hartley, 2010, p. 4)

For Hartley, it is people's *uses* of media literacy that are more significant than the texts available to them. He argues for a version of “digital literacy” which challenges “the asymmetry inherited from print, between expert producers and ordinary consumers” (2010, p. 13), “prioritises production” and “goes beyond access, understanding and use, to encompass creativity, innovation and change.” (2010, p. 11). However, the focus on *users*, which is the important contribution in this work, fails to provide a robust account of how various social influences provide a priori conditions for the sorts of choices that are made.

In many ways the argument is a re-iteration of the arguments for a focus on production that, as explored above, are central to many models of critical literacy and critical media literacy. The distinctiveness of Hartley's argument, however, is in how he frames macro dimensions of social media. Attention to macro dimensions in established media education has tended to focus on identifying and considering the impact of producers' concerns and priorities, for example, exploring the financial pressures and commercial exigencies which shape the production of media texts – we can see this in Kellner and Share's framework outlined earlier. Attention to macro dimensions in social media contexts needs to recognise how meaning-making occurs through diverse sources connected in multiple ways or networks. This draws attention to the kind of agency and "distributed expertise" (2010, p. 21) that may be generated through these "dynamic systems." For Hartley, such work would be achieved through enhanced opportunities for participation which would, he argues, generate greater criticality as users explored what was and was not possible.

The continuing case for criticality

Calls for focusing on ethics, design and participation make a valuable contribution to debates around the role of social media in educational contexts, offering multiple opportunities for creativity and expression, whilst avoiding the over-simplified analysis that might be associated with rational critique of social media texts. However, whilst agreeing that such opportunities should be important dimensions of social media in educational contexts, we argue that there is still a need for reflexive critique. We see critique, as distinct from ethics, design and participation, as important for two reasons.

Firstly we argue that the very instability and elusiveness of positionality itself invites a critical stance. Research on social media has repeatedly drawn our attention to the significance of the presentation of self (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Dowdall, 2009; Merchant, 2010). This is unsurprising when such environments thrive on the construction of profile pages and espouse a design ethic of personalisation. In such work it has become common to assert that our identities develop and emerge through interaction and, following the theories of Goffman (1959) and others, that the social self is performed in front of an audience of others. This point of view is particularly persuasive in examining social media contexts where individuals consciously choose biographic data to share, select avatars to represent themselves on screen, and names or aliases (whether real or fictive). The highly connected relationships promoted by social media allow, and even encourage, users to anchor relationships and social activities to the real world and in relation to existing or emerging social networks. Spencer-Oatey has suggested that:

Identity helps people "locate" themselves in social worlds. By helping to define where they belong and where they do not belong in relation to others, it helps to anchor them in their social worlds, giving them a sense of place. (Spencer-Oatey, 2007, p. 642)

Identity work in social media is therefore tightly bound to life offline and, although it is characterised by fluidity, it is still shaped by dominant and dominating social forces. But to the extent that identity is fluid and constructed socially, then identity, networks and practice become unbounded concepts that are in a state of constant

negotiation and modification. Achieving a critical stance on this would seem to be an important part of understanding how our lives do (and might) relate to others.

Secondly, the need to focus explicitly on critique becomes more pressing in the light of variations in users' engagement with social media. Not only are there significant differences in the extent and range of social media use (Ito et al., 2009), but networks themselves vary in the extent to which they empower or disempower individuals and the contexts in which they do so. These power positions are likely to reproduce existing social inequities. It is often assumed that online social networking is in some way a unitary phenomenon, whereas in actual fact SNSs themselves are silos, traversed in particular ways by particular users who are locked into particular sites (Lanier, 2010). Even within a single SNS, division continues to perpetuate, interest groups form and dissolve, and levels of use vary widely. Online social networks can limit opportunity and reinforce social exclusion just as they do in offline worlds (for example, see MacDonald, Shildrick, Webster & Simpson, 2005). This becomes particularly significant when we consider how social capital is rendered in the digital age. Bourdieu's defines social capital as:

...the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition [...] which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively owned capital. (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 51).

Drawing on this, we could conceive of social capital in terms of the resources that reside in individuals' social networks – resources that might be mobilised by them for their own ends. As a result, the totality of our interconnections, both online and offline – our Facebook friends as well as our work colleagues – contribute to this capital and so, too, do the social institutions and organisations that we participate in. It may be overplaying the significance of social media to suggest that these kinds of networks might transform the social capital of an individual or group. However, it is likely to augment it, and this in itself would suggest that what we do and who we are being through and around networks, both individually and collectively, is worthy of critique.

In the next section we propose a model for taking such work forward. We argue that a critical pedagogy for social media needs to acknowledge and respond to these complexities and we therefore advocate a shift in the locus of study in order to help us see new media *within broader social and broader textual networks*. Rather than using the text as the means through which to examine or act upon the social and economic context as in established critical literacy and media literacy practices, this shift in locus foregrounds the practices that are involved and the social networks in which they are embedded.

CRITICAL NETWORKS: A MODEL FOR CRITICAL PRACTICE WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

In developing an analysis of social media, we must account for the ways in which individuals' meaning-making practices help them to perform identities within relational networks and how these networks contribute (or not) to that sense of belonging. In doing so, we suggest that it is helpful to construct a framework around

the inter-connected and mutually constitutive notions of *practice*, *networks* and *identity* (see Fig 3). We now explore each of these elements in turn.

The focus on *practice* relates to ‘what we do’ in and around new environments. This definition draws on the New Literacy Studies approach, which describes practice in terms of the interplay of purpose, context and resource (Barton, 2007). Critical practice in this context may be less about digital technology as an abstract force (one that considers how it might structure our thoughts and actions) and more about an interrogation and evaluation of what we and others are actually doing on and off-line. If practices in new media are patterned by:

- A tendency to re-mix or re-work existing material (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006);
- Alternative connections with known and unknown others (Marwick & boyd, 2010);
- Opportunities for multiple presentations of the self (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2010);
- Multimodality and an emergent modularised design (Kress, 2010);
- Blurring of the distinction between consumption/production or reading/writing (Bruns, 2008);

then a focus on *practice(s)* would seem more productive than a focus on single instances of textual production. Practices would include meaning-making and relationship work in both on- and off-line worlds (Leander & McKim, 2003). In this way we might extend thinking about practice and connectedness to consider how online contexts intersect with offline contexts – for example how they enrich, contradict, supplement or parody each other. This in turn might help to explore what might be achieved through social media, with a focus on who will benefit and who will be disadvantaged by activity in these contexts. Through an inventory approach to social media practice it may then be possible to identify how advantageous activity could be shaped.

The focus on *networks* highlights the mingling and inter-connections between individuals through a range of environments. Shifting the attention away from the text, this would explore the kinds of networks that are sustained and created in social media. A focus on networks would explore who we are communicating with, who is (or might be) communicating with us, and the significance of this. This might lead on to thinking about the kinds of communities we could connect with or the kinds of communities we might create, again with the focus on the question of advantageous activity.

The focus on *identity* explores *who* it is possible to be in these different contexts and *how* that manifests itself. Identity may be framed in various ways that relate reflexively to the architecture of individual sites or wider online and offline activity – for example, the templates in social networking sites as well as the discourses that circulate as individuals connect to others and others connect to them. A focus on identity, then, may help to unpick notions of agency and possibility and explore what it is possible to *be* individually and collectively.

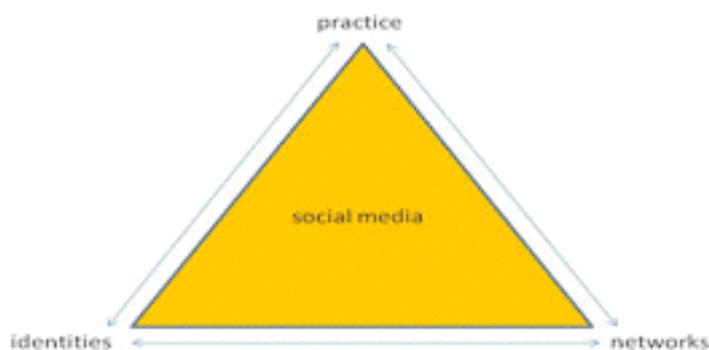


Figure 3. Practice, networks and identity in social media: A model

Practice, networks, and identity, as well as their inter-relationship, are represented in Figure 3. This illustrates how they are enacted *around* social media (in fact social media would be nothing without them). But also the representation implies that the inter-relationship may occur *outside* social media. When interactions occur solely within online communities, in which there is no other form of interaction, then these relationships would be completely mediated by the digital environment. We have not represented this diagrammatically, but such a representation would involve practice, networks and identity being enacted *through* social media. The model, whilst allowing for this variation, attempts to capture the interaction between the three foundational aspects. Importantly it uses these as a focus, rather than the software that mediates their inter-relationship, or isolated texts extracted from social media contexts, such as tweets, social networking pages or YouTube movies.

TURNING PRACTICE TO ADVANTAGE

In the opening section of this paper, we highlighted the significance of “advantageous practice”, an idea which we drew from the work of Greenhow and Robelia (2009). In this section, we expand on this concept in the light of the analytical model proposed above. Particularly we seek to explore what might constitute a discussion of “advantage” in educational settings, why we see it as central to a new critical practice and what further development is needed. First of all though, since practice becomes an organising principle or starting point of our work, some illustration of what this might mean in social media contexts may be useful.

We have defined practice in terms of ‘what we do’ in and around new media environments, the meanings that are made, the ways in which these meanings are assembled using the multimedia communicative tools at our disposal and how these intersect with offline social worlds. In the arena of social media, some examples of the sorts of activities encompassed by such a definition include:

- Circulating information or sharing opinions that relate to media consumption (for example, soap operas, videogames, books, movies, celebrity tweets);
- Canvassing wider opinion, seeking advice or support (for example, social issues, personal difficulties, technical problems, crowd-sourcing);
- Co-ordinating action on social or political issues (for example, petitioning, environmental action, smart mobs, demonstrations);

- Enhancing personal and family relationships (for example, sharing minutiae, emotions, jokes, co-ordinating arrangements, social events);
- Sharing and developing occupational or educational activity (for example, announcements, news and updates, back-channeling).

From this, a number of observations arise. Firstly, as can be seen, these practices are not exclusively tied to a particular environment or textual form; instead they draw on broader social contexts. So, for example, although the celebrity tweet is a phenomenon “in” Twitter, it needs other discourses and other contexts in order to make any sense at all. Secondly, the practice focus highlights the social trend towards largely unregulated peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing, in which traditional sources of knowledge and authority may play a new or diminished role, or even no part at all. And finally, the examples we have used show fairly benign uses of social media, but it must also be acknowledged that the affordances of social media can also be used to support illegal and criminal activity as well as the circulation of inflammatory, disrespectful and illicit material.

These observations illustrate some of the ways in which social media practice is distinctive, but they also give us some purchase on the question of what might be defined as advantageous. In their paper on social media, Greenhow and Robelia (2009, p. 125) include practices that are “legal, ethical, safe and responsible” and go on to identify the potential advantages of *academic* and *career* networking. They also suggest that social media is an environment for the development of twenty-first century competences that can provide opportunities for extending learning beyond the confines of traditional schooling.

One of the difficulties with the concept of advantageousness, however, is that it avoids direct attribution – whose advantage is served and who defines what advantage is? This is particularly true in school contexts, in which learners’ immediate needs and interests regularly conflict with educators’ views of what “they” think they need or should be interested in. In order to honour this ambiguity, the idea of what is of advantage must always be open to negotiation, debate and critique, if only to avoid the trap of over-investing authority in teachers’ value structures – a position already identified as problematic in earlier critical approaches. That which is advantageous to students must remain a central concern. So advantageous practice is perhaps best seen as a dialectical process, based on an enquiry into how one is positioned in and positioned by social context, with a view to seeking ways in which these positions can be influenced in a positive and worthwhile way – one that is likely to benefit the communities and social networks of affiliation. Advantageous practices are therefore likely to be situated and localised in character, although they may well relate to larger national and transnational concerns. This is based on a view that meaning-making is part of purposive social action embedded in local contexts and patterned by wider structural forces. Social media are then most productively viewed as what Prinsloo (2005) calls “placed” resources.

As a result, we suggest that the work of advantageous practice might move from a consideration and reflection on existing practices (and the identities that are performed within specific networks) to an examination of new practice possibilities (and their associated identities and networks). This would entail a movement from *what are we doing* in social media to a consideration of *what might we be doing* in

social media and would involve invoking goals and ambitions (both personal and social) alongside the skills and competencies associated with new literacies. In this we are suggesting a critical practice that is prospective rather than retrospective. The limitation of this is that it remains somewhat value-free. Compensating for this shortcoming is beyond the scope of this paper in that it invites a fuller exploration of what Jenkins et al. (2006) refer to as the “ethics challenge”. We do, however, tentatively suggest some principles that we feel go a little further than Kress’s (2010) idea of benefit and dis-benefit to the designer’s community. For us advantageous practice is concerned with:

- Increasing individuals’ life chances;
- Enhancing civic engagement;
- Empowerment through collaboration and participation;
- Making a positive contribution to the wider community;
- Recognising and responding to diverse identities and viewpoints.

This, we believe, returns some responsibility to teachers and the interventions they make and, as Buckingham (2010) has argued, retains an important role for the school as a public institution in an increasingly fragmented, post-modern world.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that various forms of social media are in the ascendancy, and are particularly strong influences in the lifeworlds of some sectors of the global population. Although it is important to recognise that these media and their uses are by no means universal (see Cosenza, 2010 for an illustration of global distribution), they do play a powerful role in the lives of an increasing number of children and young people. New literacies are continuing to develop around social media and we have argued that it is therefore important for educators to engage with them. Here we echo the sentiments of Hull & Stornaiuolo, who argue that, “...the rewards could not be greater, or the risk of failure more grave for educating a citizenry able and willing to communicate with digital tools across differences in a radically interconnected yet divided world” (Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2010, p. 85).

Yet at the same time, we have argued that the existing paradigms of critical literacy and critical media literacy are limited in their capacity to engage productively with the fluid and densely interwoven spaces of social media and suggest that a practice-focused model based on the interplay of diverse purposes, contexts and resources is a more useful analytical tool. Our conception of new media practices includes a view of how individual identities are formed and performed and how these are in turn embedded in social networks. The tri-partite model we propose shows *practice*, *identity* and *networks* as interdependent and mutually constitutive.

By deploying the concept of *advantageous practice* we have suggested ways in which some of the ambitions of earlier critical traditions might be reframed to support educators in the important endeavour of responding to youth engagement in social media. However, we have also identified how the so-called ethical challenge requires further work. If the enterprise of education has anything to do with looking at the world and the part one plays in it (developing a position), then working out what one might do to re-position oneself seems to us to be an important and worthwhile project.

In much current educational provision, decisions about this are often made for students – “you will learn literacy in a certain way because that will enable you to read/write in a way that reflects who we think you should become” – but the critical tradition is about enabling individuals to have some control over this positioning and offering them the potential for future action. Given the power and potential of social media, the challenge for educators lies in finding ways of working that recognise the unevenness of participation and the possibility for new kinds of agency without denying the everyday pleasures of social life online.

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