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New Media Literacies

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Introduction: Media and New Media

While the Merriam-Webster online dictionary traces the first known use of the word *media* in the English language to 1841, tools that facilitate the storage and delivery of human expression have existed for 40,000 years. From Pleistocene-epoch cave drawings to texts produced via movable type, to on-demand video content accessed via personal mobile devices, the means of message production and distribution has expanded from exclusive and local to inclusive and international. During the same period, media have evolved from one-way monomodal communication to interactive, multimodal, social experiences (Kress and Leeuwen 2001).

Though media differ in terms of the types of discourse they support, the way they can be designed, and the means of their production and distribution, it is the extent to which they bridge distance and support multidirectional interaction that largely determines if they are counted as *new media* or not (Flew and Smith 2011). Media that primarily transmit in one direction (e.g., academic journals, broadcast radio and television, printed novels and newspapers)

constrain access to the means of designing, producing, and distributing expression and generally exist outside the umbrella of new media. Digital platforms that simultaneously facilitate the democratized design, production, and distribution of interactive expression over networks are counted as new media (Beavis 2013). This, however, is not to suggest a rigid binary. While, in some ways, new media have supplanted other forms of media, their emergence has also led to multiple levels of convergence and overlap among the range of media platforms wherein features, users, and content are shared within and across groups, modes, and platforms (Jenkins 2006).

Print Media Literacy and New Media Literacies

Historically speaking, an ability to decode and encode the standardized form of print media is said to make an individual literate (New London Group 1996). In languages like English, literacy is commonly characterized by an awareness that written symbols correspond to spoken sounds which, when combined and read from left to right, create words, phrases, and sentences.

This traditional view of literacy often operates from the standpoint that there is a central, singular mode of expression used by those who are literate. Communicative practices that don't follow the rigid conventions of schooled texts are often positioned as informal, less important, or incorrect (Gee 2004). This can affix a deficit perspective and/or transgressive value judgment to the literacy practices of individuals who – despite being active members of other discourse groups engaged in complex expressive practices – struggle with or reject schooled literacy as inauthentic (Steinkuehler et al. 2005).

Researchers and philosophers have recognized that the societal practices of different groups rely on different literacies (Kress 2003). Thinking of literacies as overlapping sets of fluid multidimensional meaning-making abilities, relationships, and identities aligns with the ways groups and organizations continually cocreate communicative practices that follow unique conventions based on the needs of the group and the affordances and constraints of the expressive platforms available to them (Kalantzis and Cope 2012).

Participating in groups that exist for the purpose of planning and executing World of Warcraft raids, grassroots organizing for social justice in South Texas, staying connected with a sibling living abroad, or writing and reviewing federal US NSF or IES grants each requires a different combination of understandings and practices about how to interact and communicate using a range of expressive channels – many of which happen over new media platforms. These combinations of understandings and practices each constitute a literacy (Kalantzis and Cope 2012). These literacies overlap in many ways, yet differences between social groups, the communicative tasks they undertake, and the platforms and modalities they use to interact produce variations in communication, understanding, and participation.

Acknowledging the fluidity and multidimensionality described above shifts the perspective from thinking of literacy as a set of general skills related to a fixed body of words and rules toward a multiplicity-of-literacies perspective wherein each discursive context requires a set of communicative abilities – each with overlapping discursive practices, new and old media networks, social groups, and identities (Gee 2004).

Growth and Convergence in New Media Literacies

While not all literacies use networked digital platforms, a large portion of groups employing new literacies do so via new media. The growing ubiquity of networked devices and the rapid emergence, low cost, and inclusive nature of new media have supported unprecedented growth in literacies (Gee 2004; Kalantzis and Cope 2012).

Though new discourse groups with their own practices and new media with their own affordances are both emerging at such a rate that one cannot hope to learn to successfully engage with all of them, several factors support the development of an individual's new media literacies (Gee 2004). A focus in the last 20 years on human computer interaction, particularly interface usability as well as the stabilization – if not market-driven standardization – of how emerging communication technologies support the design, manipulation, and exchange of a range of modal artifacts has created a level of portability or interchangeability of new media literacies practices (Thomas et al. 2007). Understanding how text, image, and video are created and used by a group on one platform typically affords users translational insight into the communicative conventions of how text, image, and video are created and used by distinct groups or on distinct new media platforms.

In the ways described above, participation within and between multiple discourse groups that use new media platforms builds a sort of *funds of [new media literacies] knowledge* (Schwartz 2015) based on the discrete features of the digital platforms and the interactional practices of the discourse groups of which one is a member. For instance, joining a group that advocates for refugee rights via memes, videos, and public Twitter chats may require one to develop an awareness of a specialized subset of content knowledge and communicative conventions, as well as multimodal design and new

media dissemination practices in order to successfully participate in the group. However, for many people living within networked societies, their current and past social experiences often act as bridges toward learning to successfully participate with new groups such as the refugee rights advocacy group or via new technologies.

For example, a junior at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who interacts over the mobile messaging app WhatsApp with fans of the British soccer team Chelsea FC and also interacts with members of a Facebook climate change awareness group by creating environment-related memes and infographics would be able to leverage a number of her existing literacies in support of the refugee rights group. Specifically, her existing practices related to identifying reliable sources, making sense of the data and information in those sources, and creating messages based on her synthesis would transfer from her work with climate change awareness to the refugee rights group. While she may have to learn a great deal about specific challenges faced by refugees as well as the international, national, and local support to which refugees are entitled by law, her new media literacies include practices for learning about and navigating within new domains of knowledge. Furthermore, even though she may be new to Twitter, her literacies of multimodal instant messaging via WhatsApp and her Facebook status updates would support her in learning how to use the unique affordances of Twitter. Finally, interaction with other groups, including the climate change awareness group, would support her in picking up on and adapting to the nuances associated with interacting with members of the refugee rights group.

Marshaling technical and discursive literacies in order to successfully participate in new groups, use new digital platforms, or move fluidly between both groups and platforms represent the type of multiliteracies, metaliteracy, and/or transliteracies necessary for full participation in early twenty-first-century communication environments (Kalantzis and Cope 2012; Thomas et al. 2007). Not only does prior interaction with new media-supported groups facilitate successful interaction with other groups – and thus the acquisition of additional literacies

– but also the asynchronous interaction patterns that characterize much of new media combine to create dozens of gateways toward literacies acquisition.

For example, a plumber living in Western Nebraska in the mid-1980s diagnosed with kidney disease who wanted to better understand his illness would be limited to brief conversations with his doctor, a trifold pamphlet, and whatever his public library had on the subject – most likely a few children's books on kidneys, a general anatomy book, some encyclopedia entries, and, possibly, Seldin's 1985 book on the physiology and pathophysiology of the kidney. While his plumbing literacy could potentially support an understanding of the urinary system and his print media literacy would support his general use of books and pamphlets, he would be on his own in terms of making sense of and making connections between the specialized communicative practices found in the medical and reference sources he could access. In other words, with no kidney disease or kidney-related groups with which to interact, he would likely feel shut out of even the modest level of information available to him.

Conversely, in an environment that includes networked new media, developing literacy around kidney disease would be a much different experience. In 2016, a plumber in Western Nebraska would likely have a touchscreen smartphone with some level of Internet access. He may also be a part of social or professional groups that interact via new media. Even a modest level of new media literacies would serve as a bridge to using his phone, tablet, computer, or a computer in the public library to connect with and discern from among any of dozens if not hundreds of online support and affinity groups. Additionally, identifying reliable sources is a more distributed endeavor between increasingly aware new media users and more sophisticated search engine algorithms than was the case 15–20 years ago. A Google search of *kidney disease* offers the [US] National Kidney Foundation, the Mayo Clinic, and WebMD as three of the top four links. These organizations offer information via text, images, and video designed to help the uninitiated develop their understanding

of kidney disease and interact via new media (e.g., message boards, meet ups, video and image repositories).

The asynchronous collaborative nature of these and other groups results in a stream of multimodal artifacts that persist through time and are accessible via apps and Internet searches. Instead of 1985s five-books-and-a-pamphlet bootstrapping approach, the gateways for developing literacy around kidney disease in the early twenty-first century include scores of groups that have generated hundreds of relevant community forum threads, thousands of graphics and images, tens of thousands of videos, and millions of webpages – not to mention webinars, simulations, and virtual reality experiences. In other words, with an abundance of groups interacting over new media – resulting in a wide range of multimodal artifacts – the twenty-first-century plumber would have a spectrum of groups and a host of accessible, familiar gateways over which to interact with others who care about understanding kidney disease.

New Media Literacies in Schools

Options for social interaction in the early twenty-first century look very different from the options of 30 years ago. Over the past decade, rising levels of new media access among youth and adults within *massively networked societies* (Steinkuehler et al. 2005, p. 99) have increased the likelihood that members of such societies spend considerable time involved in a number of affinity-based social groups that use new media to express themselves and interact (Perrin 2015). The frequent, multifaceted, and voluntary nature of new media-supported interaction not only facilitates youth development of new media literacies but also is recognized as a potential source for increasing youth engagement in, and understanding of, school-based literacy.

New media platforms are often identified as opportunities for schools to leverage the popularity and features of technologically mediated networks for educational purposes. Since the late 1990s, teachers have worked to integrate new media and aspects of new literacies into the curriculum. The range of integration rationales includes an interest in leveraging platform affinity and novelty to inject excitement into content areas (Olmanson and Abrams 2013), rethinking student participation in learning spaces (Vasudevan 2010), encouraging the expression of student identities (Rust 2015), closing the digital divide, and mirroring collaborative ecologies of the twenty-first-century workplace and better facilitating the inclusion of multimodality in academic texts to fulfill evolving state and national expectations (Olmanson et al. 2015).

These integration efforts have historically forefronted academic literacies without meaningfully incorporating the social practices of outside groups that use new media platforms (Sims 2014). For example, a middle school English teacher in South Chicago might integrate new media into a lesson plan that has students analyze and respond to texts and videos that describe Abraham Lincoln's place in history as emancipator, opportunist, and white supremacist. She might have her students use a blog platform to create and display a 1000-word analysis wherein students individually evaluate each author's claims, share their perspective, and, in a sidebar, consider the affordances and constraints of the different mediums used. She might require her students to respond to the analysis of their peers via the blog post commenting feature and invite history majors at a local university to read her student's posts and make comments. In completing this assignment, students would likely be able to leverage aspects of their new media literacies such as an understanding of the affordances and constraints of blogs, the design of multimodal texts, and the technical side of how to give and receive peer feedback on their ideas.

While the scenario described above supports the development of critical literacy, improves evaluative authenticity, integrates new media, aligns with the US Common Core State Standards, and allows student work to become part of the global networked conversation about history, the use of youth new media literacies is constrained to elements that directly align with developing academic literacies in academic ways (Greenstein 2016). In other words, the affordances of the digital platform – but not students'

new media practices, artifacts, identities, and af-filiations – are valued and seen as the target for classroom integration (e.g., Alvarez et al. 2013). Though all discourse groups adapt the platforms they use to their needs, the experience of new media in support of academic literacy often looks very different from typical new media literacy practices undertaken by youth (Sims 2014). This tendency toward the teaching of academic litera-cies on new media platforms via a leveraging of student technical literacies without meaningfully engaging the range of new media practices used by youth leaves the role identity plays in litera-cies development unutilized (Gee 2004).

While the explicit instruction of academic literacies via new media has had some success in terms of increasing authenticity, ensuring a baseline exposure to twenty-first-century skills, and improving attitudes toward academic liter-acy, new media use in the classroom has not led to a viral increase in youth engagement with ac-ademic literacies outside of school. Pressure to ensure that students acquire academic literacies creates dynamics wherein pedagogies of direct instruction are selected over other approaches based on the perceived likelihood that they will lead to incremental, measureable gains. Similar to Ladson-Billings' (1995) critique of how edu-cational institutions try and inject cultural ele-ments of marginalized groups into the curric-ulum instead of working to connect curricular elements to practices within non-dominant cul-tures, schools largely assimilate new media to-ward their purposes. The multitudinous, het-erogeneous, shifting, voluntary, affinity-driven nature of youth new media-supported discourse groups creates a great deal of curricular poten-tial but is often seen as incongruous with in-structional practices that rely heavily on uniform-ity of purpose, process, product, and outcome.

Making the effort to meaningfully connect the school curriculum to learner literacies – many of which take place over new media – re-quires a commitment on the part of teachers to allow in, learn from, and integrate a range of nonacademic discourses into the classroom curriculum as a way to meet learners where they are. For example, students in a high school social studies class in North Omaha might be invited to offer up examples of texts from within their out-of-school interactions and group affil-iations. For a teacher to identify a student-sub-mitted transcript of an emoticon-rich adoles-cent group-text interaction about Beyoncé as an example of an argumentative text about sys-temic patriarchy requires that the teacher un-derstand Beyoncé's impact on youth culture, her lyrics, videos, and comments regarding women and society, the practices of adolescent group SMS chat, and the conventions of emoticon use. Additionally, using the group chat as the sole in-class text would require not only the teacher to build her understanding but also confirm that the other students in the class were familiar with Beyoncé so as to meaningfully participate from the interaction.

Furthermore, a willingness to embrace learn-ers' new media literacies in non-reductive ways seems to align with nonlinear pedagogies that accept the gap between academic literacy and the literacies learners experience at home and in their peer groups (Schwartz 2015). In schools the rationale for focusing on conventional liter-acy skills includes the notion that such cogni-tive practices support all forms of communica-tion and underpin future academic and societal success. While these effects may be real – with skills such as an ability to make sound-symbol connections enabling a wide range of commu-nicative interactions – alternative pathways to-ward becoming literate and developing literacies exist within a spectrum of sociocultural practices (Gee 2004; Orellana and D'warte 2010).

Conclusion

Unlike schooled literacy, which is explicitly in-structed, new literacies are acquired via inter-action, affiliation, and identification with oth-ers within particular discourse groups – many of which take place over new media. Though institu-tions of education tend to position an individual's academic literacy as an internally held measurable cognitive asset, sociolinguistic ways of framing lit-eracies involve understanding how an individual interacts and exists within particular communica-tive contexts. A capacity to interact with a wide

range of social groups does not emerge from an instructed source but rather from engaged experience within authentic discursive contexts that align with how individuals see themselves or would like to see themselves in terms of group affiliations and identities (Gee 2004).

New media platforms provide educators with the means to connect academic literacy with learner literacies. A growing body of new media literacies research highlights some of the ways educators have integrated new media literacies into learning spaces without colonizing learner practices to align solely with conventional literacy goals and neoliberalism (Alvarez et al. 2013; Orellana and D'warte 2010; Schwartz 2015; Sims 2014). For these educators, the challenge comes in designing ways for learners to meaningfully use their new media literacies within educational systems that continue to privilege psycholinguistic skills and particular print media practices as the source of academic capital.

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