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New Civic Voices & the Emerging Media Literacy Landscape

Paul Mihailidis

Department of Marketing Communication, Emerson College, Boston, MA, USA

The recent protests across the Middle East, generally referred to as the largest civic uprising enabled by social media platforms and mobile technologies, are actively reshaping how we think about citizenship, community, and participation in the 21st Century. The Arab Spring, instigated on December 19, 2010 when jobless graduate Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the Tunisia city Sidi Bouzid after his fruit cart was seized by authorities, touched off protests in the relatively peaceful Tunisia that eventually spread throughout the entire region. Citizens, who rarely had the ability or capacity to organize, now had a slew of tools to confront autocratic regimes that were largely outside the bounds of traditional mass media. These tools—Facebook, Twitter, Ushahidi, and the like—were mostly conceived as leisurely social outlets for connecting with friends and sharing personal information. The Arab Spring signifies a distinct tipping point for the use of such tools as participatory instigators and viable news outlets for journalists and audiences.

Examples like this are more common by the day. From Barack Obama's use of social media to empower a new constituency in 2008, to the "Twitter revolution" in Iran, and more recently Wikileaks publication of troves of information concerning a myriad of political topics and the use of social media for protest in support of the Nobel prize-winning Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo, social media platforms have enabled a flow of information with little regard for borders or boundaries, that has fundamentally changed how we think of dialogue, collaboration, and participation in our daily lives. Within these new spaces have emerged voices—largely those of everyday citizens—that are exposing corruption, demanding accountability, and maintaining a diverse flow of ideas and dialogue across communities, across cultures, and across divides.

What are the implications for media literacy education in light of these new societal shifts largely in and by social media platforms and mobile technologies?

As media literacy has evolved in the US and around the globe, it has incorporated more sub-disciplines (news, advertising, politics, science, etc.) and technologies (social, mobile, cms, etc.). This continued wide adoption of the term is in response to a clear growth of media in all facets of society. Indeed, as new mobile technologies have grown, we have integrated media into our daily routines and no longer arrange our time and space around media programming. This shift has created many opportunities for media literacy to be at the center of what we see as civic participation in the 21st Century. Writes media scholar Clay Shirky in *Cognitive Surplus*: "The logic of digital media, on the other hand, allows the people formerly known as the audience to create value for one another every day" (52). The ability for citizens to share information and cultivate active voices is now at the forefront of communities large and small. The result has been a more vibrant and diverse information landscape with growing emphasis on collaboration, sharing, and dialogue via inherently social media platforms, but with equal challenges for the continued preservation of diverse and tolerant civic democracies in the 21st Century. Three specific challenges face media literacy:

1. *Can media literacy create a civic agenda for social media platforms?* – As the ubiquity of social media tools has grown, and integrated their presence into all facets of civil society, media literacy will need to develop proactive and dynamic approaches for helping youth re-visualize these tools as civic and democratic—beyond the social and personal outlets they provide.
2. *Can media literacy create "active" individuals?* – Media literacy's end goal has always centered on creating an informed and critical public, but what that means today is different than in the past. In-

formed no longer means critically consuming content, but has morphed into the ability to share, collaborate, and create. This translates into a different pedagogical approach to teaching and learning about media in the 21st Century.

3. *Can media literacy remain “a-political”?* – This last point, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, ponders whether in an age when media has become more central to our civic participation and community involvement, whether media literacy can realistically not be the teaching force behind new civic voices that are inherent on the founding principles of media literacy—access, evaluation, analysis, comprehension, and production.

These challenges are indeed large, but need to be seen in their entirety for our community to begin to address the opportunities they present for media literacy educators, practitioners and scholars both in and outside of the classroom.

The good news is that a growing body of scholarship and practice around media literacy is underway. Dynamic programs, collaborations, and curriculum seem to be popping up more frequently, which is a natural response to the growing need for educational initiatives to respond to the media-centric lives of citizens today.

At the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change (www.salzburg.umd.edu), where I direct a cohort of 50 or more aspiring media practitioners from over 20 countries around the world, we build a series of global media literacy educational modules premised on connecting global media and global citizenship through the new platforms and tools for active civic voices. The students at the Academy learn about the power that voice has to build connections across cultures, dispositions, and ideologies. They then learn how to leverage new social and mobile media technologies to build multimedia videos, interactive media literacy learning modules, and media curations, that all reflect new dynamics for learning about sharing, collaboration, and expression. The learning process is one that stresses interaction, critical thought, and application of media literacy principles to building products for empowering civic voices in the 21st Century.

Similar work in *DIY Media* (Noble and Lankshear 2010), *Social Media Literacy* (De Abreu 2010), *Convergence and Participation* (Jenkins 2006, Ito 2009), *Digital Learning* (Rosen 2010, Watkins 2010) and in *News Literacy* (Mihailidis forthcoming) all approach new ideas of citizenship and media literacy that

will help pave the way for dynamic and timely educational responses to the increasing opportunities that new media platforms are providing for civic voice, participation, and action.

Media educators can no longer afford to sit back and simply teach about media messages as they come at us. It is high time that media literacy become the proactive movement that enables the future civic voices of democracies worldwide to create the meaningful dialog, collaborations, and struggles that will hold our civic societies together. In this sense, media literacy in the 21st Century will be about enabling new civic voices, ones that are tolerant, purposive, and that are active in the face of the global challenges we collectively face.

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