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Mediactive (2010)

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Mediactive by Dan Gillmor. (2010). Creative Commons Attribution: California. (<http://mediactive.com/>)

While reading Dan Gillmor's *Mediactive*, I explored it from various viewpoints. As a teacher of middle school and high school students, I wondered, "How could this book aid me in my classroom?" As a teacher educator, I wondered, "Do my students consider themselves critical thinkers? Are they able to impart media literacy skills unto their students?" I also had the views of the daughter of parents who are media novices, and an aunt whose two- and four-year-old nephews are able to search websites in a manner that amazes and frightens me. I am a culmination of all of the above, but also a student, traveller, and consumer of media. What I am not is a journalist: that is until reading *Mediactive*. I now consider myself a novice media creator and that, I think, is one of Gillmor's two key points.

We are all media creators—be it socially, professionally, or academically. Creating media can be done in many formats that are discussed in detail throughout *Mediactive*. His main point, though—and what is stressed throughout his book—is that as part of a democratic society, we must become critical thinkers when it comes to media.

Generally speaking, *Mediactive* is laid out in an easy-to-read fashion. It is written in a style that appeals to both novice and expert, as well as to educators, journalists, and students—in general, to all. Gillmor is adamant that transparency is vital to journalism, and as such, what at first seems to be bragging about his professional and social network, is, in actuality, transparency in practice.

Mediactive is more than a book; it is a multi-faceted conception. It is at the same time a printed text, a website, and a forum. Because of this, one cannot merely read the book, but must also visit the website

to truly appreciate the vision and work of Gillmor. As an educator, what I think is most impressive about *Mediactive* is its simplicity and ease of use. Gillmor is able to convey in a straightforward manner a very complicated subject—media in the twenty-first century. Though his focus is on the changing domain of journalism, as a result of the new digital age his book can be used by those who are not classified as journalists, students of journalism, or media creators. That is the brilliance of *Mediactive*.

Due to the Internet and the new mobile world (phones, computers, tablets, etc.), we are entering a hyperactive media age. It is our duty as consumers and citizens, Gillmor argues, to become actively involved and engaged in this new forum. This is not just for our current selves but also our future ones, as "none of us is truly literate unless we are creating, not just consuming" (xvii). What form that creation takes is complicated, and *Mediactive* attempts to break it down. Gillmor gives us examples through blogging, photography, and social networks, and each example is hyperlinked to useful sites to aid the reader—whether he or she is a novice or skilled practitioner—in the process of forming his or her own digital world. That is what I found most valuable about *Mediactive*—its ability to provide a starting place, a middle ground, and a future for its readers. Additionally, it is adapting and constantly changing. For educators, the text lays a lot of the groundwork for the reader. However, it must be noted that *Mediactive*'s focus is not general education. Gillmor does mention education and its importance in media literacy and teaching critical thinking skills, yet his focus is on journalism and journalism schools.

Chapter one provides the reader with a clear-cut map of the history and the current predicament facing various media conglomerates today. Chapter two can be best summarized by Gillmor himself: "we can no

longer afford to be passive users” (16). In becoming active, we must try to follow a few key principles: be skeptical, exercise judgement, open your mind, keep asking questions, and learn media techniques—thus, this chapter is a starting point for one’s journey into the media foray. Chapter three contains the must-have section for novices and educators. The sections on “checking out a website” and “detecting accuracy” are extremely helpful and easy to follow. I found the trust meter a bit convoluted; however, Gillmor is able to explain a complicated issue like echo chambers in a manner that is simple yet informative.

In chapter four, Gillmor poses the question, “What is journalism?” As a teacher, I would instead ask my students, “What is media?” This chapter could then be used as a starting point for students to learn how they can become mediactive in their communities. Building on that, chapter five provides the bedrock on which the principles of media creation rest: thoroughness, accuracy, fairness, independence, and transparency. This section is foundational for all that read this book—educators, students, journalists, novices, and experts. The importance of chapter six is that it shows what people are participating in, such as: mail lists, discussion groups, social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn), blogging (Blogger, WordPress, TypePad, Posterous), micro-blogging (Twitter), audio applications/uses (Podcasts), and visual data (photos, Flickr). For the advanced media technologist, Gillmor includes: mashups, APIs, tagging, and Content-Management Systems.

As an educator and participant in media creation, I think chapter seven is imperative, and not just for journalism students, but also for all readers. Who someone appears to be on the Internet may not be how that person wants to be perceived. It is vital to be aware of how people portray themselves, as well as how they are interpreted by others. As such, Gillmor discusses the many facets of this with regards to branding, home pages, photos, and the complications regarding public personas in the future. For an educator, this is an extremely important lesson for students but a difficult one to teach, and Gillmor provides hyperlinks that are able to assist. Future students will have the opportunity to create and share beyond anything we can currently imagine. This means that our students are truly able to go beyond our classroom walls—this is why Gillmor’s chapter eight gives us the discussion regarding experimentation and the start-up culture: guidance for anyone attempting to take that first step.

Chapter ten is one of the most interesting and, for

me, frustrating chapters of the book. While I agree with Gillmor that we must aid our young people in becoming mediactive critical thinkers, it is not easy. Pedagogy is always changing, and praxis demands that we must continually adjust—however, without the tools, time, and money, how do dedicated teachers create situations for their students to become critical thinkers? What is important is to not blame the teachers or schools for the situation, but instead to look beyond—something that I do not feel Gillmor did. The inclusion of Hobbs and her discussion regarding “what is media literacy” is vital for today’s educator, and I appreciate Gillmor’s elaboration of the major threads within media literacy (academic and political). This chapter could have been strengthened by looking at countries around the world that are positively incorporating media literacy into their classrooms (UK, Canada, Australia). Though Gillmor’s focus is not education, education is vital for a true media literate society. I found the section about danah boyd controversial. I agree that many educators feel muffled and restrained, yet her discussion that there is more opportunity for traditionally underprivileged kids to be given critical thinking skills is provocative—and overall, dismissive—of the bigger problems facing marginalized youth. The section for parents, in my opinion, should be longer and more detailed. Parents are crucial in educating their children to become media literate, but they are also learning how to become critical thinkers themselves. Bringing journalists into the classroom is a fantastic concept—I once brought my biology students to the *London Times* offices, so I understand the benefit of this beyond journalism students. Lastly, Gillmor’s outline for running a journalism school should be the outline for any school.

I had hoped that Gillmor would address the issue of plagiarism. In this new age, where our youth are downloading for free and copyright has become a complex issue, where and how do we teach our future media creators about the dangers of plagiarism? Are we explaining plagiarism to our students in a language they understand? Perhaps this can be an addition to his website. For true democracy, as explained by Gillmor, all citizens should be educated to become media literate, and *Mediactive* (website included) can support and encourage everyone to do this. However, one concept that eluded me after finishing the book was: What is Gillmor’s definition of *democracy*?

We teach, we learn, we do—this is not easy, and in order to do this effectively we must be given the tools. *Mediactive* is one such tool.