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Building a Global Community for Media Education Research

Paul Mihailidis, *Emerson College*

Renee Hobbs, *University of Rhode Island*

Julian McDougall and Richard Berger, *Bournemouth Media School, England*

This special issue on global media education was developed by a collaboration between the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* (JMLe), a publication of the National Association for Media Literacy Education in the United States and the *Media Education Research Journal* (MERJ) based at the Center for Excellence in Media Practice (CEMP) at the Bournemouth Media School in England. This collaboration has been building for some time, from conversations at the Media Literacy Research Forum at Fairfield, Connecticut, in discussions at the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change, directed by Paul Mihailidis, and developed further at the Media Education Summit in Prague in November 2014, where Renee, Paul and Julian participated in a plenary panel on international research collaboration.

For this issue, both journals invited submissions developed from presentations at the Prague Summit. The two pairs of co-editors shared and co-reviewed the submissions and we present the two journals as a 'double issue' of largely post-Summit material. We are also co-publishing this opening piece, co-authored by the four editors. At the panel discussion in Prague, we wanted to move away from fault-lines, silos and paradigm wars, to build a strategy for working together. To do this, we have to manifest the intention in tangible work and outputs. We are trying to make sure we can build capacity in what is still a small community of practice through robust but supportive critical work with new researchers. We acknowledge that media education research, and its associated field of media literacy, are difficult spaces to work in. We continue our attempts, with some success but also some failures, to embed media education in curriculum and secure a mandate for media literacy as a civic entitlement. It's important to protect media literacy as a critical, creative, reflectively curatorial - or "mediadaptive" project from both the neo-protectionist 'tune out' agendas *and* the neo-liberal discourses of employability, coding (without decoding), enterprise and the corruption for profit of potentially democratic third-space networks.

Facing the Challenges

In the UK context, media education has been struggling recently after a long period of growth. Most certainly there is trouble ahead as a reactionary political administration strives to essentialize the educational curriculum and research landscape around STEM. Media education sits precariously on the hostile border territories between Arts and Humanities. We can plead for STEAM (with *Arts* added, as Prague keynote speaker and guest editor of the last MERJ, Andrew Burn, argues) but who is listening?

In the US, the "No Child Left Behind" and "Race to the Top" madness continues along with momentum for educational technology in K-12 school. Technology companies and venture capitalists see educational technology as the next frontier, with \$20 billion spent in elementary and secondary schools in 2014. We see relentless momentum in many communities, as iPads, apps and 1:1 classrooms are all the rage even though television continues to be the primary technology used in the home, with children ages 2 - 11 spending 22 hours

a week watching television as compared to 5 hours a week using the Internet on a computer (AdWeek, 2015). The gap between home and school uses of media and technology reflects the fragmentation of positions within the domain of *digital literacy*, a phenomenon that may diminish media literacy's traditional dual emphasis on critical analysis and student media production. American media literacy educators worry that the appetite for social media and user-generated content may lead our interests in children, youth and mass media (especially news, advertising and popular culture) to be perceived as irrelevant to the practice of teaching and learning.

For these reasons, honing in on civic engagement may have real strategic value. The broad objectives for digital, media and information literacy education set out in various international policy briefing documents and the recent UNESCO declarations are laudable. But they're ambitious, perhaps crazily so. Still, if we work together to address, in particular, youth disengagement from the public sphere as the kind of outcome of critical thinking and creative media production we might want to achieve, we can also then admit to ourselves that just saying it will happen isn't enough. With a strong pedagogic rationale, we can work together across sectors and borders to try to achieve it. We're optimistic that we just might get somewhere.

The Need for Global Innovation

The need for global innovation in media literacy is greater now than ever before. The proliferation of terms, including *connected learning*, *blended learning*, *coding*, and *web literacy* suggest the perceived relevance of new ways to think about the competencies for thriving in a digital age, and these terms reflect the growing diversity of stakeholders in education, industry, libraries, government, the creative communities, NGOs and activists. The increased politicization of education, reflecting larger fractures in society resulting from increasing inequality, have created tensions and competition as plenty of fear, uncertainty and doubt exist about the economic viability of higher education, for example, in the United States, where student debt loads now top \$1.2 trillion.

Digital skills inequality may be limiting the potential impact of media literacy education around the world. Evidence of this inequality is plentiful, thanks to impressive work by Sonia Livingstone and her many colleagues across Europe. We know that simply growing up with access to technology does not, in itself, lead to the uniform acquisition of digital competencies (EU Kids Online, 2014). Research by Esther Hargittai (2013) also shows clearly that uneven access to digital skills is largely a function of social class, not age. At the Prague conference, many researchers continued to plumb the significant EUKidsOnline dataset, gathered by dozens of dedicated researchers from more than 25,000 children across Europe. This work helps us consider the complex interplay between behavior, attitudes, experience and access to media and technology in the home and school.

Media literacy educators tend to use innovative pedagogical approaches that help children and youth gain Internet skills through activities that involve creativity, collaboration, critical thinking and communication. What can media literacy researchers learn from cross-national studies of implementation? At the Prague conference, we learned about media literacy in Croatia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and many in other countries. We learned about the value of developing strategies for working collaboratively with cultural partners. In countries like Brazil, where there is little focus on media and technology in preservice education for future teachers, we discovered that there is value in providing educators with on-ramp activities, like helping read and analyze the images and words on a yogurt container or discussions with teens about the use of sarcasm in an Internet gif or meme. In countries with a robust tradition of ed tech entrepreneurship, projects that use the power of image, language and sound can promote cultural understanding and respect for diversity. In analyzing the content and context of this work, we learned that when media literacy is conceptualized as protection against bad (Western) media, the use of synchronous online dialogue between learners in different cultures can help diminish the power of stereotypes. The range of 'good practices' that are emerging shows the energetic spirit of entrepreneurship is alive and well in European cultural sector, with support from city, state and national funding and with important visibility and awareness building being supported by philanthropies like the Evens Foundation.

Global dialogue using social media tools can help children and young people to engage in activities that enable them to recognize and resist stereotypes in both entertainment and news media. One example of this work is the “Connections” project developed by Sait Tuzel, a media literacy educator from Turkey and research associate at the Media Education Lab. Middle-school students in California and Turkey analyzed media stereotypes of students, teachers and schools to learn to recognize how cultural values are articulated in entertainment. They created “day in the life” videos to depict their school and home environment, and they engaged in meaningful discussion about news events. Research showed students can identify cultural values in familiar media, but may not be comfortable talking about controversial current events. American students even gained new awareness of global power imbalances as they confront their own lack of access to global popular culture.

For media literacy research to thrive, we must continue to deepen our global dialogue. Innovation in media literacy education is, of course, highly situational and contextual; global gatherings help us recognize the many contextual elements that enable or contribute to effective work in the field. Even small-scale programs may contribute to innovation when the lessons learned are shared within the knowledge community. Such global partnerships advance new knowledge in the field. The continued development of media education research and collaboration is an essential component for scholarship in media education that reflects an increasingly connected and interdependent world. In Prague, we learned about the increasing need for a range of modalities, competencies, skills and disposition that respond effectively and timely to the increasingly mediated, techno-centric and connected digital landscape for young people. Indeed, as keynote speakers Andrew Burn, Renee Hobbs and Divina Frau-Meigs noted, the landscape of digital culture today mandates a more central role for media education as a movement to prepare young people for engagement in daily life in a mediated world.

There’s more collaboration on the horizon. In November 2015, the Engagement Lab at Emerson College and the Media Literacy Research Summit will partner with the Media Education Summit to host a symposium that explores the intersections of media, learning, and engagement in civic life. We have narrowed in on the concept of civic life because we see ever fewer boundaries between media education and civic engagement in contemporary global culture. In the United States, more primary, secondary, and tertiary curricula, both formal and informal, continue to integrate elements of media, news, and information literacy into their civics curricula. Media education, by all means, is fast become civic education. This necessarily incorporates the foundations of teaching and learning about how to critically engage with media texts. At the same time, it develops the situated context of the space of platforms that enable sharing, expression, remixing, appropriation, and production as the center of peer-to-peer, community based engagement. In Boston in 2015, we will work to continue to push the dialog of media education further towards scholarship, collaboration, and an emerging field that is at the heart of civic life today. Our work will build from that of the meetings in Prague that helped media education understand the need for research, both independent and collaborative, that can help propel new applied research and practical pedagogical development towards a more responsive, fluid, and central practice of media education across education levels, disciplines, and beyond the walls of classroom into all facets of daily life.

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