

What are we thinking about when we talk now about media literacy and / for citizenship?

Isabella Rega and Julian McDougall

Abstract

Media literacy and citizenship are both contested ideas and ‘problem spaces’.

In our research, across Cultural Studies, Education, Media Literacy and Digital Activism, we have come to understand differently how sociocultural heterogeneity and techno-cultural transformations both enable new intersections of media literacy and citizenship and compel a more, and a *differently* more, diverse media literacy and a re-negotiation of what we are thinking about when we talk about a more diverse citizenship.

This article presents a reflexive account of our research in these fragile traverses between things that made us discover how a more dynamic kind of media literacy can be developed, motivated for positive social change and the intercultural negotiation of a more diverse civic intentionality. However, we have also come to understand that such a shift is epistemological. This realisation raises profound questions for our positions as researchers and writers, which we start to address in this article.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Citizenship, Cultural Studies, Activism, Epistemology

December 1948. A man sits at a typewriter, in bed, on a remote island, fighting to complete the book that means more to him than any other. He is terribly ill. The book will be finished and, a year or so later, so will the man. January 2017. Another man stands before a crowd, which is not as large as he would like, in Washington, DC, taking the oath of office as the forty-fifth president of the United States of America. His press secretary later says that it was ‘the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration – period – both in person and around the globe.’ Asked to justify such a preposterous lie, the president’s adviser describes the statement as ‘alternative facts’. Over the next few days, US sales of the dead man’s book will rocket by almost 10,000 per cent, making it a number one best-seller. (Lynskey, 2019: xiii)

As we become increasingly fearful of how Orwell’s *1984* speaks to us now, in days when functioning civic democracies and media freedom are so precarious, it is understandable that media literacy can be seen to have its moment, as a solution to the problem of misinformation, to boost the resilience of citizens in these times of ‘post-truth’.

This is a seductive discourse for the field and yet, it is complicated.

What might we think about *differently* when we talk about media literacy?

The field of media literacy is diverse. Indigenous media literacies and Global South perspectives are moving from the margins, so that the field can start to better understand how activism for social justice can be mobilised through g/local application of media literacy, intersecting with movements and counter-representations in and through new ‘media ecologies’, a construction that captures a complex set of ecological and environmental concerns now at the very centre of the field. One is the climate crisis. The relationship between media literacy and climate change has been recently investigated by Lopez (2021). Here, ways of raising awareness of the relative health of media ecologies through media literacy converge with pedagogic approaches to fostering ‘slow media and slow looking’ (p240): ‘*At its core, as opposed to functionalist competence models, ecomedia education should be grounded in co-ethics and co-citizenship.*’ (p249). Where the ecological is mediated, media constitute an ecosystem, and thus the second concern is that posed by our new socio-technical digital order, constructed through datafication, algorithms, surveillance structures and social media. Together these overlapping concerns demand understanding and action on an ecological scale, and in this context the field of media literacy has much to for responding to the rise of algorithmic cultures, disinformation and misinformation, information fog and warfare, and the representation of nature, race, ethnicity, indigeneity and various forms of difference (see also Global Media Education Summit, 2023).

These more diverse cartographies move us to questions around how media literacy can decentre the field, a clear and present departure from binary, reductive solutionism but one that is against the grain of regulatory, protectionist or instrumentally educational imperatives.

In 2018, Jad Melki invoked Freire in calling for a “media literacy of the oppressed”, to acknowledge the gap in the field with regard to “*other contexts, particularly fragile states that are experiencing chronic conflict, terrorism, war, migration, occupation, and a constant state of economic turmoil*” (Melki 2018, p6). In a new work, Melki addresses, again from Lebanon, the civic-epistemological problem space which we seek to bear witness to, as allies from the Global North:

While we agree with ... civic cultures as a departure point for media literacy pedagogies, we believe the failures of mainstream media literacy, particularly in the US and in Western countries, are failures of philosophical direction that consequently led to failures in pedagogical design. Designing “from the point of civic intentionality” offers a great advantage over current media literacy approaches by thrusting its force towards social change, but this path is not sufficient to guarantee positive social change, as it still can be co-opted by dominant powers and emerging forces that fill power vacuums when the dominant structures or public trust collapses. (Melki, forthcoming, draft)

To offer a map of the intersection, we observe that media literacy in action (Hobbs 2021) for social justice (De Abreu 2023) is dynamic, living and unsettling (Potter – McDougall 2016; Pahl – Rowsell 2020; Lee et al 2022) and we observe this in ‘third space’ partnerships involving education, training, subcultural and community activity, activism and activism:

By media activism, we refer to mediated forms of social action that aim to achieve progressive social change..... As for activism, we understand it as something that resides somewhere between art and activism. Activism entails activities towards an outcome and this outcome usually depends on challenging power relations. In other words, activism can generate an “effect”. Unlike activism, art does not have a clear target. Art’s impact is hard to measure. It refers to a feeling, a perception, something that moves us but that we cannot quite describe. Thus, art generates “affect”. Effect and affect can be complementary in activism because affect leads to effect and effects have affective impact. (Medrado -Rega, 2023: 6)

Our way of understanding media literacy as deeply situated in cultural, geo-political and media ecosystem contexts seeks to avoid universal, ‘neutral’ solutionism and to understand tensions and nuances, such as the ways in which media literacy interventions in response to ‘information disorder’ relate to freedom of expression, civic agency and epistemological value systems. This intersection of media literacy and activism is often realised in community

media through a combination of action learning and indigenous epistemologies. One example (from many) is the work of Bruinenberg et al. with young migrants:

Engaging with literacy and the particular practices of particular young people reveals media literacy assumptions are mostly based on the lives of Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic societies. These normative frameworks partly align but also proved to be at odds with their digital identification, self-censoring, civic-engagement and (non)-news consumption. These findings demonstrate the urgency of situated, reflexive, flexible, culture and context-aware critical media literacy education. There is a strong need to provide a flexible media literacy education program with space to recognize needs of communities involved, and room for adjusting the program towards these needs. (Bruinenberg et al, 2019, p. 43).

When introducing artistic practices as a tool for activism, the focus shifts to self-representation and self-expression, not only from an individual perspective but also as a collective practice, and this shift helps us in moving from a solutionist perspective and lets us bear witness to how media literacy can become such a conduit for civic capacity as defined and conceived by participants. The eVoices project was a global network of academics and practitioners exploring how digital media literacy can be used by marginalised groups to make their voices heard within and beyond the borders of their communities and promote social inclusion. Brazilian and Kenyan artists used animation to work together and create spaces of connection and reflection to challenge marginalisation and mainstream media representation and to create a “shared repertoire of resistance practice and languages” (Medrado - Rega 2023, p.125). In the words of Milena Anjos, one of the participants in the animation workshop led in Rio de Janeiro by Ng’endo Mukii to create “a homage to Wangari Mathaii”¹, arts was the force bringing people together:

It’s fair to say that art was the real protagonist because art was what moved me to participate in the workshop due to my interest in video making. Other women were interested in other art forms, but art was what enabled us to get together. (Interview, Milena Anjos, 12/05/2021)

Through media arts, the project facilitated transformative exchanges and encounters:

We learned about video and animation, but we learned about this wonderful woman (Wangari), we met Ng’endo, and learned about her work, we learned about each other, all these inspiring African women that I did not know before. It was a beautiful exchange of histories, and learning

¹ <https://vimeo.com/321451971>

life knowledges, not just about Wangari, but also exchanges between the women and men who participated in the workshop. (Interview, Milena Anjos, 12/05/2021)

We experience the same when interviewing young people from the UK and Tunisia who participated in the *Dual Netizenship* project, an inter-cultural ‘third space’ media literacy project, for which, over three months, two youth-led media groups created a short movie titled “Blossom | زهر”². Again the driver for engagement was exercising artistic practice and in the making they created connections, reflected interculturally on values for capacity and resilience and promoted a “dialogue”, in Freirian terms, between different realities and positionalities. Through this approach, uncertainty is embraced, and participants in the making articulate and negotiate more diverse - and differently motivated - civic intention.

Therefore, the *how* of media literacy meets the *what* when third space ‘design thinking’ (Potter – McDougall, 2016) facilitates a rich meeting point between Global North generated frameworks and local geo-cultural contexts and media ecosystem challenges in diverse regions, potentially with decolonising shifts in what we think we know about media literacy. This is very different to vertical discourses of ‘voice-giving’ and civic ‘engagement’ which we often work with in the ‘universal’ epistemologies pervading media literacy solutionism.

It is therefore of great importance, not only politically but also to understand better and more deeply how media literacy works, or even, what it is, to think about how the ‘version’ of media literacy which puts forward fact-checking, source-checking and imported notions of ‘public interest’ media may not only reproduce binary thinking but also unintentionally enact epistemic violence, further alienate subaltern audiences (Spivak, 1988) and thus even bolster the appeal of conspiracy theories and increase the polarisation of discourse. In these ways, media literacy projects struggle to adapt their intervention logics to the practices of activist counter-media.

What do we think about when we talk about what media literacy is *for*?

Our attempt to situate media literacy in a more dialogic space, amidst such conflicted imperatives, has been through a focus on the capacity for citizens to act to make positive changes in and to media ecosystems. To this end, we have developed a theory of change moving beyond solutionism to work more in the complex ‘problem spaces’ of media literacy to find ways to identify how citizens can ‘defend’ themselves more agentively, informed by learning from digital activism in fragile societies, ways for people to use their media literacies

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjf9FbYKTV0>

to make the ecosystem healthier in the future, so that there is simply less danger to be resilient to and there are also less barriers to using media literacy to explore new ways of being a citizen.

Our theory of change was first developed for BBC Media Action, to strategically drive the work they do with local journalists and audiences in fragile societies around the world, and since deployed for projects with the British Council, Global Challenges Research Fund, e-nurture network and the UK Government (see McDougall - Rega, 2022 for a detailed account of how the ToC is used in our previous projects). Our reason for developing a theory of change for the intersection of media literacy with activism is that we were aware, from evidence in both fields, that *“the adoption of a theory of change approach enables researchers to evidence aspirations or intentions just as well as concrete outcomes... and provides a language to narrate their stories and articulate value in terms they understand.”* (Boulil and Hanney, 2022: 127)

A more detailed version of the theory of change and user guide is available on the website for the UK Government project:

<https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/projects/evaluating-media-literacy-theory-change>

The following is a summary of the inter-related elements.

ACCESS	Access involves when, where and how we have access to media in everyday life for citizenship, education, work and health.
AWARENESS	Media literacy enables people to have a critical awareness of how media and information represent people, events, issues and places. On a larger scale, media literacy helps us to understand how the media environment we are engaging with is constructed.
CAPABILITY	Media literacy can lead to new capabilities for civic engagement through digital media and technology and increased employability through the gaining of creative and/or digital skills.
CONSEQUENCES	Media literacy can contribute to significant change if we take media literacy actions that can make a constructive and positive impact on the media ecosystem in our lives and on the lives of others in a functioning civic society.

Table 1: Theory of Change for Agentive Media Literacy

The desire here is also to use such a theory of change to see better the interplay of literacy, culture, media and arts as environmental, drawing on re-appraisals of Freire’s contribution to

epistemology and social change in the digital age (Suzina - Tufte, 2022) or in what Fry describes (2022) as an intersect of context, content, power and paradigm, always differently inter-related in geo-cultural context an' in the impulse to "understand the whole environment of possibility' (2022, p. 157).

What should we be trying to think about when we talk about *who* media literacy is for?

A rich tapestry of projects has combined media literacy with activism in the Global South in recent years. Crucially, these are framed very differently to the kinds of development paradigm change / intervention strategy which media literacy work still seems to be adopting.

For example, the eVoices network brought together a global network of academics and practitioners to listen to lived experiences of how media arts can help marginalized groups in Brazil, Kenya and Syria make their voices heard within and beyond the borders of their communities to promote social inclusion.

Uzeugbunam (2020) has provided a synthesis of case studies of African youths' hybridized navigation of global youth cultures and indigenous cultures and from these findings, generates a set of recommendations for the field from a Global South perspective:

The tropes of hybridity could lead to a less protectionist approach to media education and a more participatory, active, complex and creative approach. Ultimately, notions and concepts such as hybrid cultures, transculturation, glocalisation, cultural negotiation, and cultural poaching could benefit the field of media education, especially in their shared dimensions of intercultural communication, multiculturalism, cultural empathy, cultural intelligence and cultural literacy. (2020, p.109).

In Ghana, Madison (2020) conducted participatory action research with local youth artists in partnership with journalism students from America to reframe the narrative in Nima to "reclaim the commonly accepted narrative about their community" (2020, p. 451) This project combined media literacy skills development for the agentic use of social media with the fostering of critical capability for self-representation and 'cultural trust':

This research challenges narratives that position people in developing nations as victims. Contemporary conceptions of power acknowledge that mobile cameras and social media provide people who were previously considered marginalized with an unprecedented public platform for agentic storytelling. Such power allows them to trumpet their authentic truths and

reframe false stereotypes. However, it is fair to say that the students' initiative is the first step in the arduous process of shifting public opinions – especially given that Western control of social media platforms favours 'clickbait' over consciousness-raising content.

The *Local Heritage and Sustainability* network brought together community-based favela tourism activists in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and local communities in rural Mozambique to create digital storymaps to reflect on their identity and to promote counter-narratives about their “(Un)told stories of colonial past in Mozambique”³ and their present and future (in Brazil), both within and beyond their borders. (Rega *et al.* 2023). This approach has been used to reclaim stories but also to reclaim physical and virtual territories; in the case of Mozambique by creating connections between local authorities, local artists, community chiefs in different part of the Nampula province narrating stories of neglected places and historical episodes that have no presence on the internet, and in Brazil connecting local guides from different favelas, producing a connected cartography of share stories and plural perspectives⁴.

In the work we have done together in recent years, combining our experiences in the media literacy and activism fields, we have identified a set of transferable design principles for intercultural media literacy work with the objective to enable the conditions of possibility for civic intentionality, (see Rega – McDougall 2021 and Aljouni *et al* 2023). These included negotiating media production objectives which enable third space inter-cultural knowledge exchange; counter-script media representation and training and development as a tripartite capability approach, sufficiently nuanced for local contexts; working with values for capacity and resilience – sharing across cultures, negotiating, refining, agreeing and reviewing - neither imposing nor evading, as this is the core of the 'uses of media literacy; for positive change; prioritising inter-cultural understanding through more fluid dynamics and reducing pressure on textual outcomes; paying attention to individuals in the collective – understanding participants' differentiated investments through meso-level observation; ensuring transparency in the inter-cultural shared understanding, taking time to understand, to avoid unintended reproduction of colonising practices; in societies with civic equality challenges; addressing power in the moment through strategic design to bear witness to demographic categories as other 'problem spaces' and striving to respecting difference as a first principle and looking out for inter-cultural nuance and textual moments that 'change the story' for each partner and going with them. For example, in the UK-Tunisian partnership for the British Council, we could identify both the recognition that inter-generational concerns were more prominent than 'youth vs media' in

³ <https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/c0f23ff4a94db1d7ee4c05a7a8a218df/mozambique/index.html>

⁴ <https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/c0f23ff4a94db1d7ee4c05a7a8a218df/favela-virtual-tour-2-0/index.html>

Tunisia and also the fusion of aesthetics and poetry with social realism. In another project, *Digital Arts – Refugee Engagement*, working with refugee youth making digital art across and between Bangladesh and Turkey, we could see most clearly how the third space partnership itself, in terms of the ethical listening it required by partners and the audience reached with digital arts, created good consequences. In this case, media literacy consequences could be observed more clearly *within* the third space, as opposed to the third space being a catalyst for impacts in the first spaces of participants or consistent with new directions of travel for second spaces (see Aljouni et al, 2023).

For this kind of media literacy work to increase equality, diversity and inclusion, a more situated and intersectional approach to participation is required and the potential for projects to unintentionally reproduce colonial power relations must be addressed as a first principle. These ‘third space’ media literacy and activist projects, such as Madison’s work in Ghana above, set out to address the power dynamics inherent to inter-cultural partnerships, especially where Global South ‘agency’ is framed by ‘neoliberal capacity building’. Likewise, Schoon et al (2020) pose the question of “*what is actually means to adapt existing digital media research methods from the Global North to the diverse contexts of Africa, and whether this might require a simple rejigging to account for parameters such as access to the internet, or indeed an entire epistemological shift to recognise African ‘ways of being’ and knowledge production.*” (2020, p.2).

In navigating the complex relations between media literacy and civic intentionality in spaces where activism can shift the premise of this work, we can see how media literacy could be remotivated to address a toxic media ecosystem by agentive practices for positive change but also to redress epistemological imbalance. In this way, we can start to see in a new way how work that generates new knowledge about the potential connections between media literacy, communities and civic engagement and thus to understand better the possibilities for addressing media literacy’s “civic problem” (Mihailidis, 2018) is that which is operationalized in creative intersections – third spaces – *between* these domains and practices, but also how the intercultural relation needs to shift.

What are we thinking about when we talk *now* about media literacy and being a ‘citizen’?

If media literacy is to find a place in relation to education and Cultural Studies, motivated to a more critical, intercultural and social change oriented “Onlife Citizenship”, then it seems apparent that the weighting of *intercultural* must pivot to a different origin. In our work in

Tunisia, we sought to connect the funder's strategic objectives for the mainstreaming of equality, diversity and inclusion and the development of inclusive communities to contemporary, peer-reviewed findings from youth-led media literacy research in inter-cultural contexts. Along with other researchers, we have analysed a process in more contemporary media activism which resonates with the Cultural Studies conceptualization of subcultural mediated counter-narratives. In the Cultural Studies' frame of reference, such work can perhaps be pulled together around the theme of a reflexive 'symbolic creativity', from Paul Willis – *"it is here, in this interlocking of human beings and cultural codes and of forms, that there is the possibility of 'being surprised'"* (1990, p.92). This kind of media literacy work, for community imperatives, may generate civic activity from more organic participant interests, in 'local ecologies' and it is possible, sometimes desirable, in terms of where we are coming from, to situate the activist media literacy work we have researched as contemporary developments on this trajectory out of the UK Cultural Studies approach to youth and subculture into the more recent field of media literacy for civic engagement but also within a continuum, between philanthropic or strategic 'sponsored development' and organic, subcultural activity. Projects can be developed as cultural expression but then be characterised more by 'sponsored empowerment' when capacity to act is motivated towards specific public sphere framing of 'civic engagement'. This tension is not new or specific to current geo-cultural concerns at stake in inter-cultural convergence in media literacy contexts but, rather, inherent in the relationship between Cultural Studies' interest in subcultural politics as the semiotics of agency and the theorising of more fluid and evasive textual practices.

With regard to what it means to *be* a citizen now, with such rapid increases in migration and civic transition in digital lives, Neag and Sefton-Green observe how "Forging a new life means not only finding a place to stay but, today, also making a presence visible across the migrant's different platforms." (2021, p.17), whilst Marino (2020) observes the complex tension between the technological processing of refugee and migrant identities into 'data subjects' and technology for social good, desiring "an alternative, techno- mediated framework where the possibility of a counter-hegemonic project around a new idea for social justice for refugees can potentially be imagined." (2020, p.8).

In a recent contribution to the ongoing application of Freire's ideas to the communication and social change, the arena in which we wish to locate media literacy in this moment, Suzina and Tufte curated an extended dialogue between 19 scholars and activists from 11 countries. The project of decolonising social change is where we can identify the urgent imperatives for media literacy to think differently about itself, and especially with regard to the narrative it crafts for

itself around 'civic engagement'. Specifically, we are struck by the implications for media literacy of the kinds of criticality Claudia Magallenes- Blanco advocates:

In indigenous communities, there is the notion of one's own communication and one's appropriated communication. We need to be able to take this into other areas of our lives: those things that are true to us, to our hearts, to our practices, that allow us to be community and be in community; as well as those things that we need to appropriate. But of course, we should have a critical perspective of those things we need to appropriate in order to appropriate them while subverting them. (Suzina - Tufte, 2022, p.70)

The question is, then, how can citizens in indigenous communities use their media literacy to both appropriate and subvert media literacy? And what is 'our' role, writing from where we are, with our privileges, access to funding and voice, in this? What are we thinking about when we write and talk about this?

What do we think about when we talk about what we write about media literacy, citizens and social change?

To this point, we have hoped to explain how our research with and about people, media, literacy and activism has obliged us to listen to individual and collective experiences, to see movement building and counter-narrative generation, from diverse and complex struggles, and how we have been able, with all of our academic privilege, to map, frame, theorise and makes connections around the ways in which media literacy capabilities can be combined with an active desire for media environments *and* modes of civic engagement to promote equality, diversity and social justice in new ways.

But we are where we are, literally, geographically, culturally, financially. Christian Fuchs bears witness to a situation we recognise very well, how the media literacy field is addressing "*a range of global problems that concern humans in many parts of the world and that form important contexts for communication, culture, the media, creative labour and the digital*" but how the structural inequalities that both restrict our work and from which we benefit "*do not encourage international and global collaboration that includes scholars from developing countries on equal academic and financial grounds*", creating difficulties "*for establishing truly international and global studies*" (Fuchs, 2019, p.15).

So these critical and conflicted intersections now seem to urge us to go further to look again at what we are seeing when we talk about what we think we are doing, through the lens of new epistemologies, from the South and from struggle, a purposefully awkward context for media literacy in relation to Cultural Studies and our ideas about how what we are doing can mobilise a 'civic' response.

When we recently convened our research centre's international conference in Vancouver (the aforementioned Global Media Education Summit), we purposefully wrestled with the challenges we are articulating in this article. Claudia Magallenes-Blanco, in her keynote, explained that, key to the positionality she takes is how she defines herself as an ally of the indigenous women she works with. This takes us to the heart of the question about how Global North media literacy scholars seeking to unsettle the field to use our privilege for ethical listening, first, and for the more ambitious project of the epistemological shift. Another of our keynotes, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes about taking Western media scholar Marshall McLuhan, omniscient at a Canadian media literacy event, to the literal curb, *"to weave and spin outside the Eurocentric mirror, to follow wires and miss files, to punch through indices and stand on platforms. To shelter by refusing and by fabricating. Because after is not less. Rather, to come after is to change what remains in store for the future."* (2022, p.225).

Our 'wicked problem', then, is that the shift we are starting to make, informed in our case by the ways in which our collaborations have brought both opportunities and deep-rooted power dynamics to the surface in new ways, is about somehow going to a very different starting point, an obligation to start out *from* diversity, instead of towards it. It means situating "media literacy" in an epistemological problem space, as well as in a much more difficult relation with what we think it is to be a citizen. But, clearly and obviously, the question of who makes the shift is fraught with all of the tensions unpacked above. The work of the Brazilian feminist author, Djamila Ribeiro (2017) on "lugar de fala" ("locus of enunciation" in English) comes to our aid here. It is about the need and the urgency of acknowledging the position from which we speak, of reflecting upon our own identities and social standings, of recognising our own privileges and empathising with minority groups and by doing so going back to Freire's emphasis (1972) on dialogue as the central mechanism to achieve social change and justice (Suzina -Tufte, 2020). For Freire, this requires humility, "the specific requirement of recognising that people – any people – are knowledgeable [...] and that the authentic truth [...] does not reside with any individual or group, nor can be forced upon one group by another." (Medrado – Rega, 2022, p.7). And embracing our own epistemological incompleteness (Nyamnjoh, 2017) forces us to acknowledging the importance of creating connections with other's knowledge, adopting a

pluriversal mode of seeing the world, trying to start out from diversity instead of working towards it.

We hope that, in this way, media literacy can come to understand itself as being not a solution to anything but primarily as a *process* of change and that “social change cannot be achieved through any abstract entity exogenous to human agency”, or else.. “the result .. may be digitally driven yet will mirror the existing injustices on the ground.” (Kim 2022, p.124).

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