

# POWER LINES

Connecting with Teens  
in Urban Communities  
Through Media Literacy

JIMMEKA ANDERSON and KELLY CZARNECKI

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FOR REVIEW ONLY

# FOREWORD

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One of the most subversive institutions in the United States is the public library.

—BELL HOOKS, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*

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**Libraries, community, and media literacy education are three central** themes covered in this book, *Power Lines: Connecting with Teens in Urban Communities Through Media Literacy*, coauthored by Jimmeka Anderson and Kelly Czarnecki. The first theme introduces us to a place embedded in many communities in the United States—the library. Libraries have always been the great equalizer in our society, though they have often gone unnoticed. They embody the community they exist in, through their programming and resources, by providing services where only limited ones exist, by offering media and mediated environments to people of all ages, and more. They reach out to various socially advantaged and disadvantaged groups in their localities—the visible and obvious, as well as citizens who are often overlooked.

As an institution, a library is about welcoming the public. Libraries provide shelter and respite, often servicing those experiencing homelessness and poverty. Simultaneously, they can also serve the struggling teen who needs a safe or quiet space, the person looking for jobs, or those learning new skills. In the library, there are no barriers to joining individuals or bringing them together within activities or programming. Libraries are in fact a blender for everything and everyone at all points in their lives: they are a welcoming place for a new mom while her child wanders through the stacks, a quiet place for someone who is shying away from the public, an access point for technology, an instructional place for someone who needs to research or who needs help with research, and so much more.

The programming offered by libraries bridges people and their community—the second theme of this book—and is particularly relevant when looking at the urban setting. In thinking about the ways in which we engage with information, specifically through the lens of media literacy education—the third theme of this book—the question of representation comes to the forefront. For example, the term *urban* comes with its own context. Consider the following text in stories written about urban communities when the term *urban* is searched online:

- “In many large *urban* school districts, three in four students or more are poor” (Weiss 2012).
- “Thirty-two percent of residents in *urban* areas are 50 or older” (The Associated Press 2017).
- “They fail to consider that the opportunities for involvement they are offering may not be what *urban* parents really need, at least initially” (Ackerman 2011).
- “This is not your average struggling *urban* high school” (Chiles 2015).

Media literacy instruction tries to take into account how representation matters, context matters, and voice matters—beyond what is characterized by the headlines. The value in analyzing and understanding various representations in the media, and imparting this type of learning to young people, is what brings the present book to life.

Libraries facilitate urban areas in both large and small ways. They become a central part of the community that they engage in and offer an extension to the schools, parents, and other regional services. Anderson and Czarnecki provide an opportunity for readers to consider how library programming connects with audiences, especially when it comes to teens, young adult programming, civics, and media literacy education. Further, the book considers the dichotomy of the term *urban* and looks at the influence of libraries as one of the greatest assets in many urban communities.

Media literacy education is an avenue to find the greater frame of reference, to explore ideas that are not represented, and to retell a story that is not limited by the images presented by the media. The value in offering this type of education is the principal subject of Anderson and Czarnecki’s book. As a growing body of work in libraries, media literacy education has become the tool for bringing youth together and sharing



in their connections as well as productions. Librarians have seen it all, and now they have taken up the work of helping youth engage in the issue of media literacy through discernment, action, and advocacy.

Finally, a preeminent feature of Anderson and Czarnecki's collection is that they share the ideas of a wide range of thinkers, from academics to practitioners to teens in their own voices, by means of their reflections on each of the individual chapters. The authors have ensured that the voices and ideas of young people, the generation that is most involved in the mediated world, are amplified in this book. In doing so, they offer to the reader a chance to glimpse indiscriminate possibilities, while also offering plausible ideas that can be utilized in a variety of settings. Each of the chapters in this book provides knowledge and inspiration for libraries, librarians, and media educators—who are ready to rise to the challenge of teaching media literacy education in their community.

~Belinha S. De Abreu, Media Literacy Educator

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# PREFACE

**There are times in history when certain books must be written.** *Power Lines: Connecting with Teens in Urban Communities Through Media Literacy* is one of these books. The famous words of W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) are still relevant today when he asked, “How does it feel to be a problem?” Given the current state of our nation’s political and educational climate, teens, particularly those who attend urban schools, have been relegated to a substandard system where they have garnered media attention and a national spotlight not for the positive attributes they bring to the educational setting, but for negative stories and headlines that are often manufactured to get likes and clicks.

I want to be crystal clear. Many teens in urban communities are facing an academic death in our nation’s K–12 public, charter, and private schools. Unfortunately, educators, librarians, and many other stakeholders continue to make excuses about why it is not their fault that teens in urban communities are not achieving academically. However, these stakeholders never discuss what lies within their power to change when it comes to the question of educating teens in urban communities and school districts across the country. This book is a welcome addition to the education knowledge base, as it provides a new and fresh perspective on how to effectively serve teens in urban communities via media literacy and the role librarians can play to shape those teens’ media literacy skills.

It is my hope that this book reaches educators, librarians, and media literacy advocates and makes a positive impact for teens in urban communities to achieve academically in the most affluent country in the world. We can no longer, in this age of educational accountability,

continue to stand by and watch the achievement levels of this student population remain at or near the bottom of every major academic barometer and feel comfortable with our work as education professionals. Once the education profession chooses to fully embrace the educational potential of teens in urban communities, we will see transformations occur that will truly propel this population to want to achieve at a high level because their schools and libraries are taking a vested interest in developing their media literacy skills, which will allow them to reach their full potential.

*Power Lines* is also for Black parents who send their children to school expecting something great to happen, only to be met with disappointment at the door of the school building. The greatness they expect for their teens is why many work one, two, or even three jobs to make sure their children have food on the table and a roof over their head just so they can make it to school. Unfortunately, when their teens matriculate through our nation's schools, they are met with "educational rhetoric." This educational rhetoric tells the parents all that is perceived to be wrong with their children rather than how the schooling experience (media literacy skill attainment) will put them in the best position to have a positive impact on their lives.

Finally, this book embraces the voices, hopes, and dreams of so many who have died for teens in urban communities to have a right to a quality education in this country. We thank you for making the ultimate sacrifice so that one day the education profession can reach its full potential by serving the educational needs of this population. I have come to learn that we have to continue to push until this change happens. This is why I commend the authors, Jimmeka Anderson and Kelly Czarnecki, for this valuable contribution to the education profession. An intentional focus on the positive impacts of media literacy on teens in urban communities is exactly what we need at this moment. It is my hope that this book will spark a new movement of media literacy that is specifically focused on teens in urban communities.

~Chance W. Lewis, Carol Grotnes Belk  
Distinguished Professor of Urban Education

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# INTRODUCTION

## Remembering the Why

JIMMEKA ANDERSON

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Media can be used to oppress or liberate. It is up to us to teach the next generation how to use this *powerful* tool for the good of humanity.

~JIMMEKA ANDERSON

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**I am a Black woman, a single mother, born from poverty, and making less than \$30,000 a year with a college degree.** The year is 2009. Every day I am surrounded entirely by White women and men who are my colleagues. Their clothes are pressed, creased pants and white linen tops that blow as freely when they walk by as they themselves appear to be. They appear to have it all together. I speak their language and mimic their gestures. I work uptown, two blocks from the bus transit and across from the construction site on 7th Street at the library. There is a homeless woman on the corner I walk by every day who clutches her Bible and screams at demons when they pass by. She looks like me. I work with teens every day who are raised in the same streets and neighborhoods where my family and I lived. These teens all look like my family, extended cousins perhaps. We share the same language. While at work, my mind drifts away in deep thought at times. Like . . . I worry if I will have enough money to pay my rent at the end of the month. One day, one of the teens told me she has no idea where her family is going to live at the end of the month. Our struggle is one and the same. We're both longing to do more than just struggle and barely survive. The teen's story I know very well, but mine is buried behind the smile I use to greet them and my colleagues. I wake up the next day and every day for them. I know they are depending on me to be there when they walk through those doors. For me to be a listening ear. For me to create a space for them to express and be their authentic selves as freely as the white linen shirt my colleague has on that blows as she walks by. As freely as I, myself, would like to be. They are depending on me to help

them see a world and a life beyond our neighborhood every chance that we share time and space. So I wake up the next day and every day for them. Because through them, I found purpose.

It was 2008 when I started my job at the ImaginOn library in Charlotte, North Carolina, after graduating from college. I was making very little money but was extremely rich with ambition. I never would have imagined that I would be working at a public library, but the supervisor who hired me was looking for a strong community programmer. When I first walked through the doors of ImaginOn, the walls were painted in bright vibrant colors, yellows and oranges, with toys, origami figures, and festive trinkets hanging from the ceiling. If there was ever a place to just go and dream of tomorrows, this appeared to be it. In the building there were two large theaters, a decorative costume room, and a scenery shop for designing the sets for stage plays and box office performances. The place was absolutely magical.

By the end of my first week, I couldn't help but notice that I was the only Black woman in my department and only one of three in an entire building with at least fifty or more staff. I didn't realize at the time that this was largely due to the fact that more than 80 percent of librarians and those in the field of librarianship were White. Needless to say, code-switching naturally became embedded in my everyday routine at work, partly because I was afraid I wouldn't be accepted or deemed professional otherwise. Interestingly enough, the majority of the teens who entered the doors of our library were BIPOC. I observed how these teens were sometimes met with resistance and microaggressions from White staff and security guards in the building who didn't understand them or didn't know their stories—and were hyper-criminalized because of their presence.

When I started working at the library, I immediately immersed myself in doing what I did best: programming. During my first year at the library, I tested the waters with all types of nontraditional programs. Teens immediately began to gravitate toward some of my random programming ideas. For instance, I coordinated an actual step team that performed at library events, and I hosted Krumpin' (a style of dance) contests to support a documentary on that art form, jump rope challenges to discuss literature on health and wellness, and open mics for teens to share their own music and poetry with a speakeasy lounge ambiance.

Through the power of programming, I built strong bonds with teens and connected with my colleagues in meaningful ways from collaborations. The large number of participants and the active engagement I had with teens in the building caught the attention of managers and colleagues in other departments, and I eventually segued into creating system-wide initiatives and events. After two years spent finding what resonated the most with the teens I served in the community and what I felt most comfortable doing, I realized that my niche for programming was in media literacy.

Unfortunately, in 2010 our library experienced substantial budget cuts. Nearly 200 employees were laid off from work at the library, and I was merely one of the numbers. Now unemployed and with a child, I realized I had to come up with a plan for what to do next with my life. So I enrolled back in school and took classes in digital media and web design. Given the fact that I had developed a strong passion for media literacy education with teens, I decided in 2011 to create the nonprofit organization I AM not the MEdia. At the time, I focused on providing media literacy outreach programs to teens throughout the city of Charlotte. The organization immediately took off in its first year. Bookings came from schools, clubs, churches, and recreation centers in North Carolina and other states to request media literacy programs with youth, predominantly in urban communities.

I returned to my same position at the library in 2012. Now, I was working full-time at the library and doing media literacy outreach for I AM not the MEdia in the evenings and on my days off. Kelly Czarnecki and I had crossed paths when I began working at *ImaginOn* in 2008, but it wasn't until 2012 that we collaborated on our first program together, *The Fashion Apprentice*. From that collaboration I realized how dynamically our programming skills meshed. We began to create locally and nationally recognized programs for the teens of Charlotte and won an award from the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA). By 2015, I was teaching digital media courses at the Carolina School of Broadcasting in North Carolina and volunteering with organizations such as the National Association for Media Literacy Education, Media Literacy Now, and other groups to build relationships in the media literacy community. From these experiences I met some amazing folks who stretched my thinking of who I was as a Black woman in the field and

who assured me that my voice was valued and necessary. I am forever grateful because those moments of mentorship helped empower me to become the devoted media literacy educator I am today and challenged me to be my most authentic self while doing this work.

After working at the library for ten years, I decided to pursue my PhD full-time in the field of urban education and focus my research efforts on media literacy education with historically marginalized youth. My research in the urban education PhD program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte inspired the vision behind this book. Once I came up with the vision for it, I immediately reached out to Kelly to see if she would be interested in taking this writing and editing journey with me. Needless to say, I am extremely grateful she said yes.

## **WHY THE TITLE *POWER LINES*?**

It may have been my inner poet that led me to fall in love with the ambiguity of the phrase *Power Lines* and the different messages, hidden and unhidden, that it afforded, just like the media. Power lines are one of the most visible features found in inner-city urban communities, but the phrase could also represent certain connections with people and places such as libraries. In hip-hop culture, *lines* are words, lyrical verses, or text. So if someone were to tell you “those lines are tight” after reading something you wrote, know that it means your words and how you used them were exquisite. Thus, power lines could also metaphorically represent the influence of words and text found in media. Moreover, the word *power* alone is ambiguous in its use for the title and is coded to denote both hegemony and media. Understanding power and how it functions is a large part of the work of doing media literacy instruction with teens in urban communities. Thus, Kelly and I have sought to provide a compelling perspective toward understanding the influence of power structures on both ourselves and the communities we serve. Furthermore, we have collaborated with field experts and practitioners to develop a strategic guide for implementing media literacy programming with teens in urban communities.

## WHY FOCUS ON TEENS IN URBAN COMMUNITIES?

Now more than ever before, information and digital literacies are essential skills for survival and for staying informed in our media-saturated world. Unfortunately, historically marginalized and economically disadvantaged youth in urban communities score the lowest in information and communication technology proficiency, and they lack critical media literacy skills to successfully navigate and disseminate information online, according to national data (Nation's Report Card 2018). Although libraries have begun to invest in media literacy education initiatives with adults, immediate attention is needed to educate librarians on how to serve teens. Specifically, further insight on serving teens in urban communities is needed due to challenges with technology and internet accessibility, instructional inequities, and their high risk of media and informational illiteracy. Therefore, we believe this work is essential as it robustly acknowledges the challenges that come with teaching media literacy to teens in urban communities.

This book is divided into two parts. Part I provides strategic and practical approaches to building relationships and making a space for teens to engage and learn media literacy skills. Each chapter in part I concludes with reflections from teens, experts, and researchers in the field. Part II provides program profiles and case studies from librarians, practitioners, and scholars from all over the United States for implementing media literacy programs in libraries. The book concludes with next steps and resources for librarians.

In conclusion, as I reflect back on my “why” or purpose for doing this work and for writing this book, I am reminded of the reason why we as educators are extremely valuable. The world needs us and the youth we serve, especially in urban communities. They are depending on us every day to help them thrive—and not just survive—in a world that was not intended for them to succeed in. Moreover, I hope this book inspires you to reflect on your own “why,” and I hope that you acquire knowledge you can apply and use to spark change in your community. I am extremely thankful to Kelly for agreeing to be my coauthor, and for the many colleagues in the media literacy field who invested in the vision of this book and believed in its potential to make a difference.



I am truly appreciative of everyone who contributed their time and poured out their stories to create these pages. Without this village of teens, practitioners, researchers, and librarians coming together, this book would not have been possible.

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FOR REVIEW ONLY

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