

Media Literacy for Justice

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Media Literacy for Justice

LESSONS FOR CHANGING
THE WORLD

Belinha S. De Abreu

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FOREWORD

Yohuru Williams

**Distinguished university chair and founding director
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In his famous “Moon Shot” speech delivered at Rice University in September 1961, President John F. Kennedy discussed the rapid advances in technology. These advances put the United States in position to meet his ambitious goal of placing a person on the moon by the end of the decade. At the same time, Kennedy acknowledged that such a “breathtaking pace” could not “help but create new ills as it dispels old, new ignorance, new problems, new dangers. Surely the opening vistas of space promise high costs and hardships, as well as high reward.”¹

Four years later in June 1965, in his commencement speech to the graduates of Oberlin College, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. offered a different perspective on technology and its relationship to social justice. Warning of the dangers of social isolation and insularity that could result from a reliance on technology devoid of human compassion, King nevertheless acknowledged that “the geographic togetherness of our world has been brought into being, to a large extent, through modern man’s scientific ingenuity.”² The challenge, he observed, was to bend the benefits of technology to meet the needs of equality and justice globally. “What we are facing today,” he told his audience,

is the fact that through our scientific and technological genius we’ve made of this world a neighborhood. And now through our moral and ethical commitment we must make of it a brotherhood. We must all learn to live together as brothers—or we will all perish together as fools. This is the great issue facing us today. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone. We are tied together.³

How to achieve this in the age of mass media, far beyond perhaps what even President Kennedy and Dr. King could have imagined, is one of the primary themes of this important book. “If children don’t shape images,” Bill Ivey, former chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, observed in 2000, “images will shape them.”⁴ The risks are real. As the media literacy scholar Jacquelyn Kibbey noted in 2011: “Now that we know that what is at stake is the global economy, it’s obvious that we need to prepare future citizens to know how to balance their checkbooks and budget their incomes, but it is just as important to help them understand how to read images.”⁵

The explosion in social media in the decade since she penned those words has highlighted the immediacy of this work. Young people are literally bombarded with images and information, raw and unfiltered. The contours of when and how they receive information have changed dramatically from just a few years ago, resulting, on the positive side, in a democratization of information, and on the negative side, in the monumental task of discriminating fact from fiction while discerning credible sources. We live in an era when

the first president of the United States to communicate directly with the American people via social media was eventually banned from them. We have viewed the cell phone videos that captured the continuing brutality visited on Black and Brown bodies and helped catalyze a national movement. Young people need to become not only savvy consumers of media, but informed contributors to it as well.

In each chapter of this book, the global media literacy educator Belinha De Abreu provides her thinking, along with contributing scholars; they offer their reflections on the various challenges posed by this new age, followed by a lesson concept that is designed to provide insight for other educators, the chief stewards of the next generation of learners. With the proliferation of media tools and platforms, the task is more pressing now than at any time in our nation's history. It pivots on issues of access, equity, and justice.

Social media platforms today have certainly created the neighborhood that Dr. King projected, but the fraternity that he believed was necessary to ensure justice remains elusive. As presently constituted, social media tend to simply re-create and promote in digital and virtual spaces the worst elements of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of bigotry that continue to foment division and injustice. There is still tremendous opportunity for these platforms to serve as sites for civil discourse, dialogue, and discussion, however. That work begins with the basic foundational labor of developing the critical thinking skills not only to be able to successfully navigate these platforms, but to reimagine them as hubs of empathy and justice. This includes using social media platforms as sites to build respect, rapport, and relationships (chapter 1), dispel misinformation and disinformation (chapter 2), practice civics in society (chapter 4), probe ethical dilemmas (chapter 5), and enlarge worldviews (chapter 9), just to highlight a few.

These are issues that are essential to the preservation of American democracy, as media literacy has become an indispensable tool to meaningful engagement on a range of issues from voting rights to criminal justice reform. These issues, of course, also transcend borders, and thus media literacy is equally critical for informed dialogue and participation for young people as inhabitants of a global village struggling with issues of equity, justice in health outcomes, environmental justice, and a host of other issues with roots in our shared humanity.⁶

Readers will find more than just thoughtful reflections on these issues here. They will also discover true inspiration in the outstanding lesson concepts devoted to helping young people to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve media literacy for justice and community.

NOTES

1. Papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, President's Office Files, Speech Files, Address at Rice University, Houston, Texas, September 12, 1962.
2. Martin Luther King Jr. "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution," sermon, National Cathedral, Washington, DC, March 31, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10>.
3. King, "Remaining Awake."
4. Bill Ivey quoted in Jacquelyn S. Kibbey, "Chapter Four: Media Literacy and Social Justice in a Visual World," *Counterpoints* 403 (2011): 50–61, www.jstor.org/stable/42981595.
5. Kibbey, "Chapter Four," 50–61, www.jstor.org/stable/42981595.
6. For insights on the importance of global media literacy, see Belinha S. De Abreu and Melda N. Yildiz, *Global Media Literacy in a Digital Age: Teaching Beyond Borders* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

PREFACE

Asha Rangappa

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As of this writing, the United States has suffered 654,000 deaths from COVID-19, and that number is still rising. Facebook has admitted that the top-performing article on its site in the first quarter of 2021 was one that falsely claimed that the COVID-19 vaccine could lead to death. People skeptical of the vaccine have turned to deworming medicine used for livestock after inaccurate reporting about the vaccine's effectiveness in combating COVID-19 spread rapidly on social media. Meanwhile, approximately 25 percent of Americans still believe that Donald Trump is the "true president" of the United States, despite the fact that President Joe Biden won the Electoral College vote in 2020 and was certified as the winner by Congress. The Department of Homeland Security has warned that persistent disinformation regarding the 2020 election may result in future acts of violence similar to what occurred at the Capitol on January 6 against members of Congress or other targets.

Media literacy—the ability to discern the accuracy, credibility, or evidence of bias in media content—is now literally a matter of life and death in America. Although disinformation has existed for millennia, two factors have contributed to its exponential rise. The first of these is the multiplicity of media platforms that are now providing information. Unlike just twenty-five years ago, we are no longer limited to three major news channels and a handful of major television networks and radio stations. The advent of cable TV and the internet has allowed for the proliferation of thousands of sources of information—websites, cable news channels, satellite radio stations, and podcasts, to name a few—any one of which can be tailored to suit an individual's personal preferences and preexisting biases. Social media, in particular, have contributed to the second factor, which is lowering—or even eliminating—the barriers to entry for publishing information. We can no longer rely on journalistic norms to prescreen information for minimal standards of reliability. In short, we are saturated with too much information, which is stretching the limits of our own cognitive capacities, and we lack any intermediaries for sorting what is true from what is not.

Truth is especially important for social justice. That's because while social justice may be grounded in higher principles like human rights, equality, or due process, these principles can only be *practically* implemented as policies. This means that social justice advocates must use democratic mechanisms, like peaceful protest, debate, advocacy, and persuasion, to convince policy-makers and win the public to their side. What this assumes, of course, is that both social justice advocates, and their opponents, are starting from a shared set of facts—or at least a shared set of ground rules for determining which facts are true and worthy of debate, and which are not.

As a lawyer, I think of these ground rules a lot. Even in this new media landscape, courts are one of the few arenas where truth still matters. Because of lawyers' professional responsibility to be truthful in what they present to the court, the standards created by

rules of evidence, and the obligation of judges and juries to objectively screen and weigh evidence, the legal system creates among its participants a shared commitment to finding the truth. In doing so, it can be a powerful tool for social justice, as we saw in the 2021 trial and conviction of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd. Courts have also upheld the importance of truth by repeatedly throwing out fraudulent claims of election fraud brought by the Trump campaign and even sanctioning some of the lawyers who made them. In doing so, the judicial system has been an important guard-rail protecting our democracy.

But relying on the courts isn't enough. We need to reestablish this shared commitment to finding the truth in our society at large. Media literacy is a part of this process. It is an indispensable building block for justice because it creates a shared factual starting point for advocacy, debate, and consensus. These skills, in turn, are important pillars of democracy, as they allow us to unite around universal principles and sustain our trust in each other even when we disagree on how to realize those principles in practice. The essays in this volume offer reflections and insights into how media literacy can reclaim and inculcate what Alexis de Tocqueville called the "habits of the heart"—the common values which shape our civic engagement, political participation, and social fabric.

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