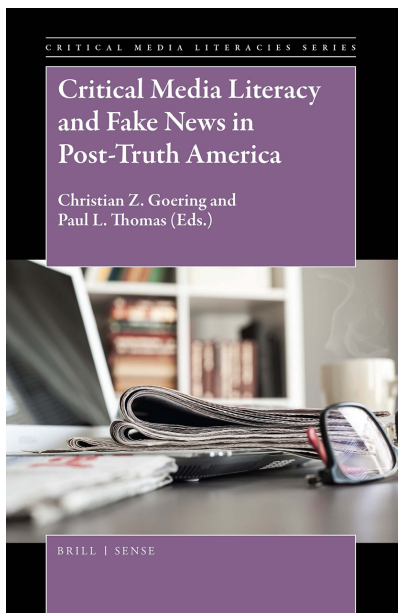# JoLLE@UGA®
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Review of Critical Media Literacy and Fake News in Post-Truth America
Edited by Christian Z. Goering and Paul L. Thomas

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In *Critical Media Literacy and Fake News in Post-Truth America,* Christian Z. Goering and Paul L. Thomas have curated a collection of essays, theories, and pedagogical explorations of media literacy that focus attention on the central political challenges of our era. At a time when popular dystopian fiction like *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are returning to popularity because of their frightening relevance, media literacy has taken on new dimensions and renewed cultural attention. How can students who are coming of age now make sense of the information they are constantly bombarded with? How can they know what to believe in a world of propagandistic news, a president known to lie publicly numerous times a day, and an endless barrage of information in the palm of their hands? Moreover, as Hillary Janks (2018) puts it, in our time, "emotion and belief are more important than objective facts, and people are only interested in whether the communicator is on their side" (p. 98). How, then, can educators teach students to make sense of the world as it is mediated through various media channels?

Fake news, a central concern of this collection, takes on numerous forms in this volume. The term "fake news" is variously defined as referring to untrue information, information unpleasant to the receiver, or more broadly to the entirety of information as filtered through the ideological lens of mainstream media. The difficulty of defining the terms highlights one of the central challenges of our current political reality and the central question of this book: how should educators respond to a world in which truth is so slippery, even basic facts are so heavily disputed by members of the same society that no agreement seems possible?

Of course, the long shadows of Donald Trump, Fox News, and the 2016 election loom large over the chapters of this collection. While these actors and events did not, at least not exclusively, create the current crisis of truth, they have certainly galvanized it and brought it to mainstream attention. Indeed, the very first sentence of Thomas's introduction frames this text in relation to our last presidential election. On the next page, he reminds readers of the role of propaganda and misinformation in the carrying out of atrocities such as war and genocide throughout history. Our political landscape, then, serves to frame and emphasize the urgency of critical media literacy in our times.

Indeed, the chapters included in this volume all share this sense of urgency, even as they explore diverse angles on the topic of media literacy. Media literacy, like fake news, does not take just one form. Starting with Thomas's "An Educator's Primer," media literacy is taken up in myriad ways by the authors of this collection. Critical media literacy is framed in complementary ways: as a form of resistance against an encroaching testing culture that colonizes and neutralizes thought, and as a means of supporting critical engagement with civic and democratic issues. It is positioned in relation to digital literacy, literature curricula, journalism, narrative structure, television news, social activism, and even mindfulness. While most of the chapters pertain to classroom incorporations of media literacy, some remain decidedly theoretical. All chapters, however, emphasize the importance of media literacy curricula for students now, in the future, and in the past. The United States of America, it seems, is feeling the ill effects of failure to critically read the media and subsequently, "experiencing a renaissance in examining how power and language are inseparable" (Goering & Thomas, 2018, p. 14). There is no time, these authors seem to agree, in which such education is not needed, but the most important time to begin is now.

Digital and Multimodal Critical Media Literacy

Several chapters explore the most common version of media literacy—its application to the analysis of news delivered through television and, more recently, the Internet. Rob Williams, for example, extends the critique of mainstream information sources Thomas begins in the opening chapter, positioning mainstream media as a form of fake news in an era of digital distraction. He identifies multiple forms of fake news, ranging from infotainment to clickbait to deep state information, highlighting the degree to which the mainstream U.S. news media present distractions in place of informative content, in the process hiding from our

attention the imperial actions of the United States. Drawing on Herman and Chomsky's (1988) propaganda model of news, Williams describes various filters that keep people in states of distraction rather than engagement. Perhaps the most notable in our digital era is the recent addition of web algorithms or filter bubbles (Pariser, 2012) that allow online content to be tailored to our individual tastes and preferences—a more sophisticated form of clickbait. Ultimately, Williams rejects proposed solutions that take power and responsibility for critical thought out of people's hands, arguing for the central role of media literacy in classrooms.

Moving from the theory into the classroom, Joanne Addison's chapter also focuses on mainstream news as propaganda. Addison develops a framework for analyzing mainstream media as propaganda, drawing from McComiskey's (2002) three-part heuristic which looks at texts on a rhetorical, textual, and discursive level. Using the heuristic as an organizing tool, Addison suggests critical questions students could ask of any media text in a classroom setting, for example, "How does the style and tone of the text call the audience into a specific role?" (Goering & Thomas, 2018, p. 92) or "What are the ideal citizens of the community to which the writer belongs?" (p. 93). She frames such questions as the beginning of the development of critical habits that students could bring to their engagement with media. To highlight classroom applications, Addison presents an analysis of an NPR Story Corps episode in which students not only ask questions of the text, but of their own subjectivity as listeners.

Two chapters, Hicks and Turner's "Reconsidering Evidence in Real World Arguments" and Endacott, Dingler, French and Broome's "Before You Click 'Share': Mindful Media Literacy as a Positive Civic Act" emphasize the analysis of online media, even as they differ in regard to the textual objects to which they direct analytic attention. Troy Hicks and Kristen Turner, drawing from a similar store of ideas contained in their recent book, *Argument in the Real World* (Turner & Hicks, 2016), examine the uses of different kinds of evidence with a focus on online

environments, suggesting that students interrogate the purposes and real-world applications of evidence to help ground their thinking in the ways authors are using, and probably manipulating, information for specific purposes. Here, their work connects not only to scholarship around media literacy, but to the growing body of research emphasizing the teaching of reading comprehension and research in online spaces (e.g. Leu, Coiro, Castek, Kinzer, & Henry, 2013). Creative teachers might draw on these two bodies of scholarship to craft curricula that mesh traditional academic skills such as comprehension and analytical writing with more contemporary issues such as critical media and digital literacy.

Endacott, Dingler, French and Broome take a different approach in a thoughtful and creative chapter detailing pedagogical ideas surrounding the sharing of information online. Rather than directing students to evaluate external information in more formally published articles, the authors position students as active creators, asking them to direct their critical attention toward themselves and the social media texts they encounter online. Drawing on Serafin (2009), the authors center their pedagogy around the concept of media mindfulness, the practice of continual awareness about the content one engages with during interactions with media. From here, they use the framework of College, Career, and Civic Life (NCSS, 2013) and questions drawn from the National Association of Media Literacy Education to help students critically examine social media activities. The authors provide practical classroom-based lessons, activities, and suggestions for evaluating information online in relation to students' own sharing activities. Here, the authors provide detailed curricular ideas that speak to the increasingly interactive nature of both online activity and media literacy. Their chapter suggests that, in an era in which students are bombarded with constant media messages, they will need to develop ongoing habits of mind that allow them to turn the lens of their critical attention not only on the texts they consume, but on their own activities and processes as well.

Similarly, in "What is the Story? Reading the Web as Narrative," Sharon Murchie and Janet Near argue for

a re-evaluation of the ways in which we teach students to analyze texts from the Internet. They critique the fact-based evaluation methods of doing online research and critical media literacy, which they see as inadequate for a post-truth world. Pointing to the relative failure of readers to discern fact from fiction, even with the relevant information at hand, Murchie and Near reject media literacy pedagogies that position readers as reading primarily for factual information. In place of a neutral, objective reader, they see online readers as engaging with narratives, even in fact-based texts. Based on this view, they make the case for teaching a form of multimodal critical discourse analysis in which students analyze the larger narratives suggested through online texts. These authors break their chapter into three forms of textual analysis: narrative, image, and emotional language. In each, they propose different avenues by which students can situate the texts they read within larger cultural narratives. The authors also tie each kind of media analysis to more traditional literature as well, helping teachers create bridges between print and online texts within curricula that position each for of textual analysis under the umbrella of media literacy.

Media Literacy with More Traditional Texts

The emphasis on printed texts is taken up in greater depth in other chapters as well. Alongside theoretical and pedagogical discussions of media literacy in relation to television and digital texts, authors in this volume explore critical media literacy in relation to more traditional aspects of English language arts (ELA) classrooms, including printed text and narrative analysis. In these chapters, authors examine the critical analysis of older novels (Williams & Woods), cross-textual cultural analysis (Armendarez), and young adult literature (Lewis). These chapters might prove particularly useful for teachers concerned about how to incorporate critical media literacy into ELA curricula, satisfy departmental requirements, or use narrative texts and analysis alongside media literacy curricula focused on television or the Internet.

In "Educating the Myth-Led," Williams and Woods frame critical literacy around cultural myths: stories that circulate in a society despite having no basis in fact. At times, such stories are intentionally circulated by those in power for the purpose of maintaining their power. They argue that media literacy begins with the critical analysis of these myths, here by means of critiquing the perspectives and portrayals found within canonical or classic texts. Williams and Woods use the example of *Last of the Mohicans*, a nineteenth century novel about a white man who comes to live with Native Americans. The authors suggest analyzing it not as a neutral account of history, but by asking students to explicitly view it as a story from the viewpoint of a white man in the 19th century and to question this perspective along with the power and interests it represents. By exploring stories as framed through particular perspectives and interests, students can start to see the ways in which more malicious cultural myths are used to maintain the power of certain groups. Here, the authors provide an entry-point into critical literacy that teachers might take up across a number of texts. English teachers could engage students in explorations of the ways in which texts and authors are never neutral, but rather always depict historically and culturally situated perspectives.

In "Engaging the Storied Mind," Erin O'Neill Armendarez draws upon a more traditional activity in English classrooms and narrative analysis, making the case for applying such analyses across media formats. Armandez proposes a curriculum in which students analyze media, breaking down cultural "adjustment narratives" (p.119)—those that position people in relation to normalizing stories that require them, implicitly or explicitly, to adjust their behavior to match expected norms. The analysis of adjustment narratives is framed as a way to create active and critical citizens, in contrast to the passive and homogenous subjects required for adjustment narratives to serve their normalizing function and work their pacifying magic. The chapter includes a litany of critical questions that students can ask of narrative texts to help them notice and destabilize the ways in which adjustment narratives are built into our media, particularly television.

Looking at media literacy from the lens of critical youth studies (Petrone, Sarigianides, & Lewis, 2014), Lewis analyzes the portrayal of Marcus, an adolescent activist in two Cory Doctorow's novels, focusing on the ways in which digital activism functions in these novels to destabilize normative portrayals of adolescents/adolescence. Through this analysis, he suggests possibilities for students to consider themselves and other young people as capable of engaging critically in activism. In doing so, Lewis highlights ways in which both students and teachers might reconceptualize the nature and purpose of youth literacy practices, particularly digital and activist literacy practices. Lewis emphasizes the value of employing a critical youth lens, analyzing the portrayal of young adults in young adult texts, in order to begin interrogating the ways in which narratives position various groups. Like Williams and Woods, he sees the analysis of novels as a gateway into other forms of critical literacy beyond the page.

Issues and Conclusions

While Goering and Thomas's collection provides a diverse range of accounts of how critical media literacy might be practiced or taught, there are several aspects of the text that could be expanded or built upon. While several chapters addressed issues of representation, few dealt explicitly or deeply with the problematic portrayals of race, gender, nationality or immigration status in the media. Given the centrality of such issues to media literacy, treating them in relation to the politics of fake news could provide powerful ideas for classroom teachers. Moreover, while the chapters mix theoretical and pedagogical conceptions, they may lean too heavily on theory to be as useful to teachers looking to incorporate media literacy in classrooms. Pedagogy is certainly not absent, but much of the space is devoted to theorizing that overlaps across chapters. While theoretical framing is not without value, of course, the collection might benefit from a balance that leans more towards explorations of classroom practice.

Overall, this collection presents a variety of ways of thinking about media literacy education and entry points for teachers who might recognize the urgency of a citizenry engaged in the practices of critical literacy and have decided that now is the time to make it a priority in classrooms. There is no student who does not engage with a litany of media texts every day and therefore no student to whom media literacy does not have potential relevance in and outside the classroom. Taken together, these chapters suggest a form of education that is not only academic and rigorous in the traditional sense, but that students can use walls outside schoolhouse in their lives now and in the future.

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