



Linking Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship in the public policy realm

By Erin McNeill, president, Media Literacy Now

What was the ethical, safe, and responsible use of Benjamin Franklin's printing press in his day? Don't print libel and slander. Publish the best arguments from each point of view. Keep your fingers away from the mechanism.

Media messages are always delivered by some form of technology, whether it's charcoal on the cave wall, a pen, a lute, a radio, or an iPhone 6. Responsible, ethical and safe use of the technology used to create media is important, because media can be powerful. Ben Franklin's printing press helped launch a revolution.

Therefore, the media literacy movement has always been about the technology, because the way technology delivers a message makes a difference in the impact of that message. Radio and printing presses vastly increased the reach of media from the individual to a mass audience. Internet-enabled social media again increases the potential reach of a message exponentially, and allows each individual access to that mass audience in an unprecedented way, with potentially life-changing consequences. The digital citizenship movement recognizes the transformative quality of this new level of global media reach.

I've been thinking lately about the connection between media literacy and digital citizenship as Media Literacy Now seeks to raise the level of public policy discourse on media, technology, and literacy. We've seen that the term "digital citizenship" has resonance among policy makers, while the closely connected term "media literacy" is apparently less accessible.

Here I want to explore how media literacy and digital citizenship are fundamentally integrated pursuits, while also examining the gaps between them and what each adds to the conversation.

Media literacy is a skill to enable critical thinking around media messages, especially those produced by corporations and ideological groups for a mass audience, to gain profit or power. Media Literacy is a pedagogy – a method of teaching. Digital citizenship refers to safe, responsible, ethical use of the digital media technologies that have become so widely accessible. Digital citizenship is the goal – a digital citizen has the literacy skills to effectively and thoughtfully use the digital tools that are now the primary means of media creation.

Media literacy proponents start from the viewpoint that media are powerful, pervasive, and expanding, and that students need the critical thinking and modern literacy skills to productively participate in today's global media environment. Digital citizenship proponents see new technologies that deliver media as a game changer that require an urgent response so that young people can participate.

Digital citizenship is about how we live in this new information age where all knowledge is available at our fingertips at all times, and where we can reach and talk to almost anyone on earth at any time. It's an exciting, but also fraught, time. We need to be developing new means and skills and guidelines of how to operate in this new world. That's digital citizenship. It's about how we as individuals act in this environment.

In media literacy education, we look at how media affect our lives in all its forms, how media shape our society, culture, attitudes, beliefs. Media literacy is literacy in the 21st century – learning to read and interpret and create messages – with a focus on the systems that deliver the messages.

So let's consider how these two ideas come together when a social media user posts a picture online. When we create media with digital technologies, we do so in a context of mass media messages created by well-funded ideological groups and corporations. Media literacy skills ensure that we are aware of that context, that we have applied critical thinking skills to the messages before creating our own, and that we are not simply perpetuating commercial messages that tell us what we should be or think. A good digital citizen will ask: What is the message that picture sends about the person who created it? And is the message reflective of his or her own story, or does it merely perpetuate a message created by others for their own profit or power?

As we consider what each of these concepts are and how they intersect, it might be instructive to consider what is left out of each term. In most cases, what appears to be excluded is not.

Digital citizenship appears to leave out messages that are delivered in non-digital form – packaging, magazines, the ads on school buses, billboards, radio. These media can be the primary vehicles for perpetuating the sexism, racism, materialism, and other negative stories that we seek to counter with media literacy. However, most media today originate in digital form. Most photographs are taken with a digital device and even if they appear in print, such as a news photograph in a newspaper, they still end up online to be shared far more widely.

What part of digital citizenship is left out of media literacy? Perhaps an understanding of how data are collected and used, with a focus on data privacy and the systems of surveillance. However, surveillance technology relies on the language of coding, and produces media in the form of data. The coding that goes into virtual reality or robotics, too, is a language that requires a modern kind of literacy to analyze and create.

On the flip side, if we permanently link these two terms in the public policy domain, what can each add? Both media literacy and digital citizenship are a frame of reference, an attitude, and an approach to learning that complement each other.

Media literacy education develops the skills to critically examine the corporate and ideological media makers, and the digital tool makers. The method of inquiry-based learning and critical thinking is explicitly included, and comes backed by evidence-based curriculum and a long history as an internationally recognized field of academic study.

Digital citizenship education ensures we're having essential conversations about technology advances that enable virtual reality, robotics, mass surveillance, artificial intelligence, and unknown future innovations, and their potential positive and negative impact on us.

My conclusion: Media literacy and digital citizenship must go together in any discussion on education policy.

Literacy is essential to citizenship so that all may know and practice their rights and responsibilities as members of a society. Certainly most would agree that literacy is essential to citizenship in a democracy. Today then, in a global media world, media literacy is essential to global citizenship. Because literacy today takes place in a digital media world, such global citizenship is the same as digital citizenship.

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