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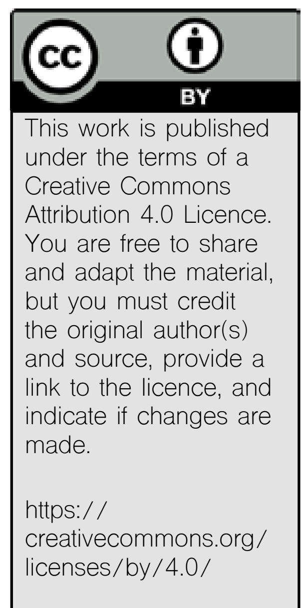
It's Critical: The Role of Critical Thinking in Media and Information Literacy

Linus Andersson
Halmstad University, School of Health and Welfare, Halmstad, Sweden
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4697-5394

Abstract
This article explores what critical thinking might mean in a media and information literacy (MIL) context by investigating how critical thinking is expressed in three reports that relate MIL to radicalization awareness and counter extremism. The purpose is to engage with recent debates about MIL and research on critical thinking and contribute to a grounded and theoretically informed foundation for discussing MIL competence. Findings indicate a primitive use of the term critical thinking, often bundled up with concepts such as democracy, creativity, and citizenship. More detailed and concrete descriptions about what to expect from critical thinking in a MIL framework display what can be described as a Gnostic impulse: critical thinking as a skill to reveal hidden meanings, to see through propaganda and flawed arguments. In other words, a critical thinking that asks people to doubt what they see. This notion is problematized in relation to writings on media literacy and critical thinking, focusing on the importance of acknowledging reflexivity and identity in the definition of critical thinking.

Keywords: critical thinking, education, media education, media literacy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Introduction
Critical thinking is considered to be one of the cornerstones of media and information literacy (MIL) (UNESCO, 2011; Potter, 2021). Likewise, it plays a central part in modern education (European Commission, 2016). However, what does critical thinking mean, and what does it mean when the ambition of media literacy is described as reinforcing media users' critical abilities? This article aims to explore uses and understandings of the concept of critical thinking in a MIL context and

put those understandings in contact with findings from recent research on critical thinking in education. The main argument is that the concept of critical thinking is under-developed in a MIL setting and that its merits when it comes to the promotion of democratic values must not be overestimated (Potter, 2021; Mihailidis, 2018). In fact, it has been suggested that MIL-education based on a limited understanding of critical thinking can backfire and end up in supporting the very narratives and attitudes that it was intended to counteract (boyd, 2017; 2018). This is especially urgent when we consider the role of online radicalization, that is, the role of information and communication in boundary-crossing that puts individuals in a position where they are prepared to use violence to pursue an ideological or religious goal.

The rise of extremism and populism in recent years (Alvarez & Dahlgren, 2016) has called attention to the role of information, disinformation, and propaganda in spreading mistrust about established information institutions such as journalism, education, and science. Many commentators have already put forth that information warfare is central to contemporary terrorism (Winters, 2018). Both of these tendencies put media and information at the center of discussions about radicalization processes. Furthermore, much of the anti-democratic and populist propaganda is presented to the public in the form of media criticism (Swedish Media Council, 2014). Mainstream media plays an important role in extremist conspiracy narratives, where the media is accused of being part of the governing elite that governs through manipulation (Bartlett & Miller, 2010). By discrediting experts, the conspiracy theory is not only appealing because it offers sense-making in a chaotic world but can also be empowering, making it difficult to intervene with counter-narratives (Moore, 2019). The conspiracy theory about media cover-up has become a familiar narrative in extremist and populist contexts (and, since the US elections of 2016, has also been a part of the political mainstream).

The challenges posed by these developments seem to have taken public institutions by surprise; apparently, the support for an open society with its foundation on pluralism and tolerance might have been over-estimated. While some of these challenges are met with technical means, such as filters against terrorist videos on YouTube or Facebook's well-known and much-discussed campaign against fake news (Levin, 2017), others have called for better cognitive equipment to prepare young people for an unruly information society. Some have argued that the rise in online hate and anti-democratic propaganda has called attention to the need for more critical approaches to media via MIL and have added the issue of radicalization to the MIL agenda (Alva, Frau-Meigs & Hassan, 2017).

Aims and purpose

This article explores what critical thinking might mean in a MIL context and does so by investigating how the concept is used in three reports that relate MIL to radicalization awareness and counter extremism. The purpose is to engage with recent debates about MIL and new research on critical thinking and contribute to a grounded and theoretically informed foundation for discussing MIL competence. This investigation is carried out with the following questions:

- How is critical thinking expressed in relation to media and information literacy?
- What can be said about the relation between critical thinking as a general (as opposed to a subject-specific) skill in the MIL context?

The article begins with a discussion about current debates in the field of media literacy, followed by a brief summary of how critical thinking has been defined and understood in the fields of education and pedagogy, as well as a discussion about the gnostic impulse in critical thought. This is followed by a short description of the reports selected for analysis as well as the approach.

Background

The present article should be read in the context of growing scholarly attention to the promises and premises of media literacy. With the public investment in media literacy to counter extremism and tackle disinformation, it becomes essential to review and problematize some fundamental assumptions about the prospects of media literacy promotion. One recent example is Potter (2021), who assesses the definitions of critical thinking as provided in the literature on media literacy. Other examples include Mihailidis (2019), Livingstone (2018a; 2018b), and boyd (2018).

Internet researcher danah boyd caused controversy in the media literacy field when she posed the question “Did Media Literacy Backfire?” (boyd, 2017), which was followed up with a talk on the same theme at SWSX-Edu 2018 (boyd, 2018). While anecdotal, the first essay points to some principal contradictions that are reflections of paradoxes found in the ideal of liberal democracy: we encourage students to seek out information and to think for themselves, and we presume that through this activity, they will end up in support of values and principles that are associated with an open society. If we have learned anything from the past years’ rise in extremism and authoritarian populism, it is that we are ill-advised to take it for granted that support for pluralism and tolerance will be the result of such activities. The main argument in boyd’s essay is that the intentions and methodology which are designed to teach media literacy and foster critical, media-literate students are ill-equipped to

meet the challenges posed by a networked, digital media landscape. In fact, she argues, there is a risk that when encouraged to question established authorities (in education or media) to do the research and make up their own minds, students are likely to fall prey to conspiracist narratives. In short, the methodology to promote critical thinking in favor of reason, and democratic ideals of pluralism and tolerance, leads to its opposite. Paul Mihailidis makes a similar case in his call for civic intentionality in media literacy promotion (Mihailidis, 2018).

boyd (2017, 2018) targets economic and technological developments in the media landscape as decisive factors to understand the present challenges. Media literacy, as it has been defined and taught over the years, was developed in an era of mass communication propaganda, when the ideological conflict could easily be reduced to the conflict between capitalism and communism, and where identification of political bias or commercial interests constituted a large part of what was considered media literacy (e.g., news literacy and advertising literacy). In part, the recent merging of media literacy and information literacy can be understood as a way to address the problems with the new media and information landscape. In 2011 UNESCO, the EU, and the European Council began a process of combining efforts in the field of media and information literacy. Instrumental in this work was the launch by UNESCO of the report Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers (2011). It has sparked a debate among stakeholders on different levels on how to understand and define the concept and how to implement it in curricula in member states of the UN and EU, debates that have been reinforced by the concern over "fake news" and "infodemics".

Another way to approach the challenge posed by boyd would be to think more carefully about the concept of "critical thinking" and what that might mean in a MIL context. In her SWSX address, boyd declares:

> As Renee Hobbs has written, media literacy is the "active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create." The field talks about the development of competencies or skills to help people analyze, evaluate, and even create media. Media literacy is imagined to be empowering, enabling individuals to have agency and giving them the tools to help create a democratic society. But fundamentally, it is a form of critical thinking that asks people to doubt what they see. And that makes me nervous. (boyd, 2018)

The form of critical thinking that boyd is criticizing can be found in UNESCO's curriculum, where critical thinking is described as "The ability to examine and analyze information and ideas in order to understand and assess their values and assumptions, rather than simply taking propositions at face value" (UNESCO, 2011, p. 182). However, definitions of critical thinking are manifold, and the vari-

ous approaches found in pedagogic literature can be helpful in developing a better understanding of what critical thinking can be.

Critical thinking

Critical thinking is generally considered one of the cornerstones of media and information literacy (Silverblatt & Eliceiri, 1997; Buckingham, 2003; Burn & Durran, 2007). Still, the MIL literature rarely elaborates, explains, or defines the concept (Potter, 2021). Some writers even avoid the concept because of its "conglomeration of meanings" (Potter, 2018, p. 16). Furthermore, the term critical thinking has been a buzzword in education for decades, especially as it has been considered a prerequisite for pursuing democratic values and meeting the demands of a complex modern society (Kennedy, Fisher & Ennis, 1990). Much discussion about critical abilities has therefore taken place in the field of education and pedagogics, especially in an American context where there has been an interest in instrumentally assessing or measuring critical thinking skills in evaluations and tests.

One problem when defining critical thinking is deciding how wide or narrow this definition should be. A classic in the field of scholarship on critical thinking, Robert H. Ennis (1962), defines critical thinking as "the correct assessing of statements." This quite narrow definition was later elaborated into "reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (Kennedy, Fisher & Ennis, 1990, p. 13). Critical thinking is understood as consisting of skills (abilities) and dispositions (attitudes). Among skills, we find the ability to identify assumptions in arguments and understand logical reasoning, while dispositions might vary from being open-minded, suspending judgment, and be self-reflective (Kennedy, Fisher & Ennis, 1990, p. 14). A well-established definition describes critical thinking as "purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based" (Facione, 1990, p. 3). When examining the normative ambitions with critical thinking in education, one can observe similarities to the "tolerance paradox" (Popper, 1945/2012). The tolerance paradox describes how there is always a risk that the tolerance of an open society gives way to intolerance (that is, if we tolerate the intolerant, they will exploit our tolerance to practise intolerance). As is the case with the open society, the pedagogic ideal of critical thinking assumes an individual described as follows:

> The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused

> in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit. (Facione, 1990, p. 3)

It may look like a value-neutral passage, but this formulation is built on an implicit premise that the critical thinker is a supporter of an open society. With perhaps two exceptions (honest in facing personal biases and prudent in making judgments) the list in the quote above might as well be used to describe how propagandists and conspiracy theorists present their case. In a narrative that is all too familiar today, a supposed establishment consisting of political and symbolical power is forcing political correctness on pacified citizens, referred to as dupes, 'snowflakes' and 'social justice warriors'. In contrast to these adversaries, the propagandists describe themselves as "red-pilled," that is, those who have come to see through the cover-up orchestrated by established media (Munn, 2019). They are the ones who are truly inquisitive, informed, and who prefer reason above emotion. They see themselves as open-minded (i.e., not blindfolded by political correctness) and diligent in seeking information (information the establishment does not want them to find). In the challenges and attacks on democracy from populism and extremism, we have seen how propagandists use the tools/features of critical thinking to shut down critical thinking. The result has been described as "post truth" or "facts resistance," where supporters of populist demagogy seem to be immune to counter-arguments and scientific evidence (e.g., climate change, migration). Sometimes this position leads to belief in conspiracy theories.

The Gnostic impulse

To what extent, then, can critical thinking help counter these tendencies? If we listen to boyd (2017, 2018), it seems as if critical thinking could be as much a part of the problem as a part of the solution. One way of coming to terms with this ambiguity would be to acknowledge the presence of a gnostic element in critical thinking and address the limitations to such an understanding of critical thinking. Writing in a different historical context characterised by political polarization and the rise of extremism and populism – Italy in the 1970s – Umberto Eco explored Gnosticism's resurgence in critical theory. The pinnacle of this endeavor was the novel *Foucault's Pendulum* (Eco, 1989), but he also elaborated on this theme in a more academic setting in the essays "Interpretation and history" and "Overinterpreting texts" (Eco, et al. 1992). The term Gnosticism has its roots in Greek rationalism where it means "true knowledge of existence" and was a spiritual contender to early Christianity in the first centuries after Christ. It developed into a doctrine that taught how the world inhabited by humans is not a creation of the true divinity but was created by an evil pseudo-god known as the Demiurge. Gnostic revelation, then, meant to see through the false world (Eco, 1992, pp. 35-38), similar to Plato's cave metaphor. For the gnostic, the path to

divinity goes through "true knowledge," not salvation through blind faith. Gnostic elements remain a recurring theme in popular culture, where the blockbuster sci-fi movie (and its sequels and spin-offs) *The Matrix* (Wachowskis, 1999) is perhaps one of the most prolific promoters of gnostic philosophy. The film also gave rise to the concept of "red-pill" as a symbol of becoming aware of the nature of reality.

It is not far-fetched to assume that this gnostic impulse in critical thinking is what made danah boyd (2018) uneasy. When critical ability and media literacy is defined by planting doubts about what one sees, there is no limitation as to what can be put into question. As seen above, UNESCO's (2011) Media and information literacy: Curriculum for teachers describes how a critical thinker assesses values and assumptions and does not take propositions at face value. Arguably, however, some propositions need to be taken at face value, and some countries even have laws about this (e.g., Holocaust-denial). When critical thinking is equated with mistrust, things get problematic.

Critical thinking as a skill

Whereas these concerns have implications for education more generally, the gnostic impulse has not been the main issue in debates over critical thinking. For a long time, such debates have centered on whether critical thinking should be understood as a general or subject-specific skill. Put differently, it concerns the question of whether critical thinking is an ability that the student can acquire and then apply across all fields, or if critical thinking is something that develops from the knowledge that one has obtained within a specific field, and thus only applies to that field (e.g., Glaser, 1941; Ennis, 1989). The notion of critical thinking as a general skill finds support in the works of Robert Ennis (1962), while John E. McPeck (1981) has stressed the contextual dimensions of critical thinking and how it relates to subject content. In a recent article (Nygren et al., 2018) an attempt was made to test this question empirically in a study that compared results from national tests across four subjects in Swedish compulsory school. The researchers compared test results that measured critical thinking with the overall results and grades in each subject. The findings showed a high correlation between grades and critical thinking in specific subjects and minimal crossover of critical thinking skills between subjects. In short, students with higher grades in a specific subject also scored highly on tests that measured critical thinking related to the subject, while it was rare that students score highly in critical thinking across subjects. This finding seems to support the notion that critical thinking is a subject-specific skill.

Critical thinking as identity

A concept such as "the ideal critical thinker (Facione, 1990), implies that critical awareness can be understood as an identity, either ascribed to students or part of the student's self-recognition. Buckingham (2003)

provides an early problematization of "critical awareness" in media literacy education. He points out how "critical" in an educational setting often has been used as a euphemism for values associated with political correctness (ideology criticism, hegemony), or as a language game where students learn to reproduce the views of the teacher (a middle-class taste), rather than developing their own opinions. The context for Buckingham's (2003) exploration is media education that targets popular culture, not propaganda, or disinformation. When he addresses the phenomenon of conspiracy theories, it is as a side-effect to analyzing racial stereotypes in mainstream media. He warns that students who come to subscribe to a strict and unreflective interpretation of representation literacy (e.g., media stereotypes) can adopt a conspiracist thinking. However, he does not discuss intentional dissemination of disinformation or propaganda.

In a more recent piece of work, set in the context of a digital media landscape abundant in disinformation and misinformation, Nygren & Guath (2019) investigated the ability of high school students to identify fake news in combination with a self-assessment where students stated how proficient they considered themselves at recognizing false information. An interesting result was that those who rated their ability to reveal false information as high did worse in the test than those who were more modest in their self-rating. This indicates that the type of skepticism or mistrust that is sometimes mistaken for source criticism can be directly harmful – those who think they are good at exposing false sources are at greater risk of being duped by them.

Material and approach

In order to explore how critical thinking is expressed in a MIL context, three reports have been selected for analysis. The reports were published between 2014 and 2017 and deal with online radicalization and anti-democratic propaganda in a context where MIL promotion is considered to be a measure to prevent radicalization. The reports were published in different contexts with somewhat different purposes and approaches: a research review, a collection of best practices, and one based on empirical research. But, for the purposes of this article that concentrates on how the concept of critical thinking appears in the texts, these differences are secondary. While the challenge of online hate, populist and extremist propaganda can be very different in different parts of the world, the idea that MIL and critical thinking can play a role in coming to terms with the problem is present in all three reports. The three reports are:

- *YOUTH AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA* is a survey of research on the Internet and social media's role in violent extremism. The report concludes that "The current state of evidence on the link between Internet, social media and violent radicalization is very limited

and still inconclusive, and particularly so in the field of information and communication sciences as compared to other disciplines (history, sociology, psychology)" (Alava, Frau-Meigs & Hassan, 2017,p. 43).

- *Media and Information Literacy: Reinforcing Human Rights, Countering Radicalization and Extremism* is a yearbook produced by the MILID network (MIL and Intercultural Dialogue) with the objective to" Strengthen and deepen the knowledge concerning Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue (MILID) on global, regional and national levels including in the frame of human rights, dialogue, democracy and peace" (Singh, Kerr & Hamburger, 2016, p. 9).
- *Pro-violence and anti-democratic messages on the Internet* is a report by the Swedish Media Council commissioned by the Swedish government assigned to study anti-democratic messages on the Internet and social media that are aimed at young persons and that encourage the use of violence for a political or ideological cause, (Swedish Media Council 2014, p. 9).

Needless to say, this small sample does not provide enough data to claim a general representation of the status of critical thinking within MIL. For a more systematic review of this, see Potter (2021). My focus is on material that is more practically oriented than theoretical, that is, where critical thinking is introduced in a context where the purpose is to counter radicalization of extremist attitudes. Furthermore, there is no final definition of MIL, which makes it even more complicated to speak of the results in general terms. However, the sample can claim some representativeness when it comes to the narrower field of MIL as an instrument to address online radicalization. As such, it can function by way of example or illustration of how critical thinking is employed, recalled, and referred to in a MIL context. The approach could be described as a combination of content and thematic analysis found in qualitative document analysis (Bowen 2009), where the reports were read with special attention to where and how the concept "critical thinking" appeared. Those passages were then approached with the aid of the theoretical descriptions of critical thinking as skill or disposition, as general or subject-specific, and the presence of the gnostic impulse.

All three reports refer to critical thinking, but depending on the nature of the report, the uses of the concept vary. The report *YOUTH AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA* devotes a subsection to "MIL and critical thinking", *MIL: Reinforcing Human Rights, Countering Radicalization and Extremism* reports on various best practices and curriculum work that involves a high degree of pedagogic reflexivity,

while *Pro-violence and anti-democratic messages on the Internet* consists of three rather lengthy analyses of online practices of radical online milieu and only engages in a more abstract discussion about MIL in the introduction and the concluding recommendations.

Analysis

The inquiry is divided into two parts where the first addresses the question of how critical thinking is expressed in MIL, and the second is concerned with what understandings of critical thinking as a skill is present in the reports.

The expression of critical thinking

In his review of definitions of critical thinking, Potter (2021) applies the term 'primitive' to concepts that are presented without definition which is attributed to an assumption on the part of the author that all readers share the same meaning of the concept. The first impression from looking at how critical thinking is addressed in the material is that it tends to appear in this 'primitive' form. It is used almost as a catch-phrase that is bundled up together with other terms, with positive connotations, such as citizenship, creativity and learning:

> As a pedagogical practice, MIL promotes a set of competences that aim to build citizenship, participation and creativity as well as critical thinking. (Alva, Frau-Meigs & Hassan, 2017, p. 39)

Another example aligns critical thinking with concepts such as democratic citizenship, learning and governance:

> MIL can effectively contribute to enhancing intercultural dialogue, mutual understanding, peace, promote human rights, freedom of expression, and counter hate, radicalization and violent extremism. In fact, MIL is fundamental to producing knowledge for critical thinking, democratic citizenship, independent learning and good governance. (Singh, Kerr & Hamburger, 2016, p. 9)

While the extracts above show examples of how critical thinking is presented in quite general terms, the report from the Swedish Media Council takes a more individualistic approach to critical thinking:

> An important success factor for this work is that it aims to reinforce the individual's ability to engage in critical thinking and analysis. To instead describe certain views – however extreme and repugnant one may think they are – as wrong

> has proven to be directly counter-productive from an extremism prevention point of view. (Swedish Media Council 2014, p. 27)

These are examples to illustrate primitive uses of the term critical thinking, where it is not assumed to be necessary to define the concept. However, from these, it is possible to say something about the definition of critical thinking based on how it is presented and (not) defined. These are examples of descriptions of critical thinking as a *disposition* rather than a specific skill. Critical thinking is linked to other rather broad competences such as creativity, participation, citizenship, and learning. One could say that these competences involve different skills, but they might just as well be seen as attitudes that are associated with a set of values linked to liberal democracy.

Critical thinking as a skill

When addressing the role of critical thinking in countering online radicalization, the reports include examples of both "generalist" as well as "subjectivist" understandings of critical thinking. An example of where it is described in general terms can be found in the following:

> Promote and evaluate MIL strategies, recognizing that new technologies are also a tool that can be used for: preventing violent extremism; encouraging counter and alternative narratives; advancing citizen education; and developing critical thinking. In this way, MIL can support human rights, dialogue, mutual understanding and tolerance, and empower young people to be masters of their own identity and to detect and resist online radicalization efforts. (Alva, Frau-Meigs & Hassan 2017, p. 51)

Here, critical thinking is not described as a fixed and ready set of tools but as something that the individual is able to develop. The way that critical thinking is presented suggests that it is more of a general skill than a skill that is subject-specific. An example of a more concrete description of what critical thinking might be and which links it to a more specific skill can be found in the following extract from The Swedish Media Council:

> The preventive measures proposed in this report are general approaches, aimed at as many as possible. More specifically, they are about reinforcing young persons as conscious users of media. This entails reinforcing media users' abilities to evaluate critically, to analyse and understand both online and offline material, to teach children and young persons to question and compare different information sources, to partake of independent investigations and to be able to evaluate texts, audio and image material. (Swedish Media Council 2014: xx)

The quote is an example of what Potter (2021) calls a 'listing definition' of critical thinking, i.e. a list that exemplifies types of skills associated with critical thinking. It describes one of the fundamental aspects of the notion of critique in a Kantian sense: to sort things out, make distinctions and evaluate (Kubok, 2017).

Gnostic impulse

While there might be various interpretations of whether critical thinking in the included reports is treated as a skill or a disposition, generalist or subject-specific, it is easy to find passages where the presence of the gnostic impulse is visible. One such example is found in Valsamidis (2016), who explicitly refers to critical thinking (following Bazalgette, 2009) as a process of demystification and disclosure of hidden meanings.

> Critical refers to access, analysis and critical thinking of audiovisual texts...Through this process, pupils come into contact with texts involving hate speech, racial violence and prejudice. Gradually, pupils develop critical thinking as they "demystify" the hidden meanings and the purpose of those texts. (Valsamidis, 2016, p. 216)

The report from The Swedish Media Council is equally detailed in its description of critical skills. Like Valsamidis, it points to critical thinking as the skill required to reveal hidden meanings and to see through flawed arguments:

> Counteracting recruitment can, in this context, can be understood as young people with the capacity for criticism of sources and analytical as well as critical thinking, will be less receptive to pro-violence and anti-democratic propaganda. A person who can critically review messages like this can also see through flawed arguments and logical gaps.
> (Swedish Media Council, 2014, p. 284)

Undoubtedly, demystifying hidden meanings and seeing through flawed arguments are traits well-rooted in the critical tradition and western intellectual history and draw on the heritage from the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution (Latour, 2004; Kubok, 2017). However, with their focus on the flaws and inconsistencies of external texts, they share a gnostic impulse in that they assume that the student can acquire knowledge about the true nature of reality.

Conclusion

Critical thinking plays an important part in descriptions of MIL, and they express a commitment to the idea that critical thinking plays a central part in MIL. The aim of this article was to explore what critical thinking might mean in a MIL-context, with the purpose of contributing to a grounded and theoretically informed foundation for dis-

cussing MIL competences. This question was operationalized into two research questions: How is critical thinking expressed in media and information literacy? What can be said about the relation between critical thinking as a general as opposed to a subject specific skill? The analysis showed how critical thinking, for the most part is used as a primitive term, bundled up with concepts such as democracy, creativity, citizenship. Those more detailed and concrete descriptions about what to expect from critical thinking in a MIL framework display what was discussed as gnostic impulse: the critical ability comes with the skill to reveal hidden meanings, see through propaganda, and flawed arguments. In other words, a critical thinking that asks people to doubt what they see.

Discussion

A critical thinking that asks people to doubt what they see makes danah boyd (2018) nervous, and there are plenty of examples how such an approach to critical thinking can be used for anti-democratic purposes. In fact, one could argue that the appeal from media literacy shares many premises with the anti-democratic propaganda based on conspiracy theories about media manipulation: analyses of media ownership concentration, critique of ideology and bias in the news are such examples. This mode of reason is just as efficient in dismantling pro-democratic statements as it is in refuting anti-democratic propaganda. In fact, it might prove even more efficient against pro-democratic discourse because then it can be presented as anti-establishment, as asking uncomfortable questions to the power, exposing the truth the authorities want to keep secret.

I have suggested that this problem can be understood as the consequences of a gnostic impulse in primitive understandings of critical thinking. Eco (1992) warns about gnostic reason because it is elitist – it comes with the promise of Enlightenment to an initiated few (e.g. the self-appointed critical thinker). It is easy to see the attraction that the power that comes with such a position holds. When one looks at the writings about critical thinking, it shows that the gnostic impulse leaves out an important step in the critical endeavor. It spends energy on exposing flaws and inconsistencies in texts but does not encourage the interpreter to explore the conditions for his/her own interpretation. This is also the point made by boyd (2018), who suggests that an updated version of media literacy should spend less time on teaching students to find political bias in the news and more on cognitive mechanisms such as confirmation bias. To this, we could add the two attributes of Facione's (1990) critical thinker that is not compatible with a gnostic impulse: honesty in facing personal biases and prudence in making judgments. The warnings about elitism in critical thinking find support in Nygren & Guath (2019), who emphasize scientific curiosity as the most important variable to explain what characterizes students who succeeded in identifying incorrect

information online. In short, curiosity is more critical than mistrust.

In addition to this, findings from Nygren et al. (2018) seem to support the view that critical thinking is contextual and closely linked to subject-specific knowledge. If we try to translate these findings to the normative project of MIL promotion, what do they mean? To promote critical thinking in a MIL context could perhaps be to focus not on encouraging cynical skepticism but on building traditional knowledge about how the media systems work and operate. How are communication channels regulated, and how do they make money? How have they developed historically? What regulations and conventions shape content? One preliminary conclusion to draw from this inquiry is that when critical thinking is introduced in a MIL setting, the important aspect of self-reflexivity seems to be left out. Students are encouraged to use their critical ability for suspicion, skepticism, assessment, and questioning, all activities that direct energy and attention to something external to dissect and expose to critical investigation. As we have seen, this version of critical thinking or critical ability is risky if the aim is to invest in progressive, pro-democratic values.

Furthermore, the uses of critical thinking in a MIL context is not devoid of gnostic impulse as it is repeatedly argued that MIL provides critical abilities to “see through” propaganda, “reveal hidden meanings,” and not to take “propositions at face value”. The danger with this way of understanding critical thinking is that it appeals to an elitist notion of knowledge and Enlightenment that does not stop at seeing through the falsehoods of populist propaganda but might also inspire and amplify a general mistrust in information intermediaries, regardless of their status or influence. In fact, this has remained an attractive force for anti-democratic movements and is also a strategy employed in contemporary propaganda. Sonia Livingstone (2018a; 2018b) has warned about MIL being treated as a silver bullet cure to treat all forms of social ailments, and it is time to ask what types of problems MIL is capable of tackling.

As the title of this article suggests, in order to avoid MIL promotion to backfire, it is critical that these investments are complemented with reflective analysis of unspoken premises and presumptions about media literacy, and how skills associated with critical thinking are best taught to students. It is promising that this debate has begun within academia and it is hoped that it will have also have an impact on the initiatives that are being implemented to promote media and information literacy.

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