

Editorial: Wishful Thinking and Real Outcomes: Teaching media literacy to marginalised children

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When this journal was founded ten years ago, it seemed unthinkable that we would have to be advocates for media literacy education for long; surely in an increasingly networked and connected world – and therefore education system – even the most conservative policy makers would see the value (if not necessity) of media education? Yet, here we are, a decade later, still re-stating our case. Thankfully there are many media education researchers around the world, working to address the issues our students face in operating in such a complicated mediated world, and we are proud to publish some of that work in this journal. We begin this issue of the *Media Education Research Journal* – the first in our ninth volume - by reflecting on two recent international conferences: the *68th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association* (ICA 2018) in Prague (Czech Republic) and the *Annual Conference of International Association for Media and Communication Research* (IAMCR 2018) in Eugene (OR, USA). What they had in common was that their themes touched upon more broadly on the connection between communication and inclusion. The ICA's theme was 'Voices', which was partially inspired by the contemporary debates around immigration and the voice of migrants and other marginalised groups (ICA 2018). The central theme of IAMCR was 'Reimagining Sustainability' that built upon the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda and its three core elements one of which is social inclusion (IAMCR 2018).

By participating in the panels at the both conferences focusing on the role of media literacy and media education in raising marginalised voices, we have eventually arrived at the difficult question whether media literacy education should be or can be used for addressing marginalisation. If one looks at the myriad of media literacy programmes and curricula designed for disadvantaged children and youth that are discussed in academic circles and offered to the public, at first glance it may seem that the answer to this question is a definite yes. In this editorial though, we would like to address this question a bit more deeply by reflecting on our own attitudes and expectations as media literacy scholars and educators. We draw our inspiration from relevant conferences and talks, as well as from our own research projects exploring the role of media literacy and media education in the life and learning of marginalised children.

To begin, we firstly turn to a paper that one of us delivered at the ICA and IAMCR

conferences last year. The talk shared the stories of the Czech Romani mothers struggling to define their cultural identity as they thought they had to choose between living according to either Romanipen culture or the dominant 'white' (as they called it) culture. This conference contribution illustrated the long-lasting and still prevailing impact of the former communist politics of assimilation in the Czech Republic on some of the local Romani people's belief, that the only way to inclusion and equality is through denying diversity. Diversity is at the core of cultural rights (see e.g. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity 2001), but it is often hard to fully embrace diversity, partly because media literacy debates about ethnic minorities in general, and Romani people in particular, are mostly positioned within the economic and social rights in which equality and inclusion override diversity. This can put media literacy initiatives for Romani people (and not only) that are centered around inclusion into difficult position, because even if meant well, they can be unintentionally reinforcing the feeling of alienation and negative cultural self-perception and self-identification.

The suggestion of this editorial however is not to approach media literacy of marginalised voices as a tool for cultural empowerment. We rather see this as a reminder that we must take into consideration the peculiarities of a given context when defining and stating the needs it responds to and the issues it aims to address. We align ourselves with Jad Melki (2018) here who – through the concept of *media literacy of the oppressed* – argues that media literacy should prioritise the problems of local communities through building upon the existing and emerging knowledge, while in the meantime adding new issues and enriching media literacy concepts (2018: 7). Although this might seem obvious, we often forget to take into account the unique context in which the marginalised children live and learn. For example, the other author of this editorial recently gave a talk *the Central and Eastern European Communication and Media Conference 2018* (Hungary) about the potential role of media literacy programmes designed for unaccompanied refugee children (Neag, 2018). An academic from the audience asked whether during the research fieldwork, the participating children were asked about cyberbullying. To be clear, one cannot dismiss the importance of cyberbullying: it can cause tremendous pain. However, in the case of refugee children, there are far more pressing issues that media education needs to acknowledge, for instance, access to online media and digital technologies.

If we know the context well enough and if we are sufficiently attentive to the ever-evolving context and people's lives within it, we might be more able to support integration and inclusion. This seemed to be the case of Manisha Pathak-Shelat and Kiran Bhatia's (2018) ethnographic media literacy research presented at the IAMCR conference, which used applied theatre to nurture dialogue, understanding and empathy between Muslim and Hindi children in Gujarat, India. The authors concluded that participating in the project helped children to delimit the boundaries of religious identities and perceive the 'other' based on their shared personal

experience of producing inclusive narratives.

Often though, we know little about marginalised children and young people's own perception of the context in which they live and learn, or about media literacy needs and wants they in fact have. This now brings us to a research by fellow academic, Yonty Friesem. In his talk at the ICA, Friesem (2018) discussed the *GiveMe5* project and a day-long filmmaking workshop for youth. Drawing upon the participating deaf students' experience and reflection, he compared two workshops in which they took part. The first workshop aimed at fostering intercultural dialogue and reinforcing inclusion via media literacy. The task therefore was for the deaf and hearing students to create a short film together. The second workshop took place two weeks after the first one in the deaf students' school and with them being the only participants. Here the primary focus was purely media literacy, concretely fostering media production skills and knowledge.

The deaf students' reflective accounts then revealed, that they found the second workshop not only more enjoyable, but also more valuable in terms of their learning. Friesem admitted and questioned his biased disappointment over the outcome. He suggested that it was clouded by his hopes and assumptions about the role of media literacy initiatives in encouraging intercultural dialogue and contributing to inclusion. Yet if we are to truly hear the voice of these deaf students, then we have to acknowledge that media education situated in their own community and focused solely on media literacy skills and knowledge was significantly more appreciated by them.

The issue is, however, that media literacy is hardly ever seen as the main focus of media education for marginalised children and youth. We would like to take a stand here against this dominant position by questioning the frequently made correlations between media literacy and increased intercultural understanding, tolerance, equality and inclusion. To explore this further, we can turn to the literacy tradition, which had previously also followed similar 'normative assumptions and expectations of vague but powerful concomitants and effects presumed to accompany changes in the diffusion of literacy' (Graff 1987: 9). As Harvey Graff writes in his book *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society*:

For the last two centuries, they [the scholarly and popular conceptions] have been intertwined with post Enlightenment, 'liberal' social theories and contemporary expectations of the role of literacy and schooling in socioeconomic development, social order, and individual progress. These important conjunctures constitute what I have come to call a 'literacy myth'.

In the article *Arming the citizen-consumer: The invention of 'media literacy' within UK communications policy* Richard Wallis and David Buckingham (2013) show how media literacy was being also framed by, and since then intertwined with, neoliberal policy discourse and public ideals in the UK. Similarly, Zoë Druick (2016) in *The Myth of Media Literacy* explores the central role of media literacy in the 'operation of neoliberal capitalism and to its critique' in the Northern America (Druick 2016: 1125). Yet while literacy theory and practice no longer, or at least not predominantly, see 'the possession of literacy skills [as] automatically linked with what they were formerly thought to have achieved' (Bogdan and Eppert 1996: 361), the myth of media literacy as a direct line to inclusion is growing and spreading.

It is understandable that in the time and space that require us to urgently advocate for the extended notion of literacy, that would equally take into account diverse modes of communication and meaning-making, we, media literacy scholars might be prone to reproducing and reinforcing some of the powerful concomitants and effects. Yet we should not forget to question how we legitimate media literacy of marginalised children and youth and why we do it in a particular way, because otherwise we might be unwantingly confirming the dominant Western 'political and economic agenda predicated on unquestioned tropes of technological progress and individual self-responsibilization [sic]' (Druick 2016: 1135).

To acknowledge and appropriately address the lived experience of marginalised children and youth when advocating their media education, we could instead take an inspiration from the understanding of literacy as 'an enabling rather than a causal factor' (Graff 1987: 9). We would then hopefully approach and treat media literacy skills and knowledge as an enabling factor allowing marginalised children and youth to make a use of it in their own unique ways, rather than in the ways we had imagined and tried to impose on them. While we might worry about their exclusion, seen in network capitalism as the dominant form of social inequality (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), they might in fact have other needs and priorities which media literacy could help them to fulfil and achieve now and in the future.

Moreover, without focusing on additional learning outcomes, such as integration, inclusion, or equality, we could concentrate on the core elements of critical and creative media literacy. If a media literacy programme is successful in improving marginalised children and youth's media literacy, it can certainly contribute to their participation, and later on to inclusion and equality. However, media literacy should not be seen as any less valuable or important when it does not lead to our own imagined outcomes. Media literacy might, in fact, enrich these children and young people's life in different, but not less valuable, ways. We just need to ask what these ways are, and truly listen to diverse voices. This issue, then, presents a wealth of varied approaches and findings in the field of media education.

Philip Pond, J. Fiona Peterson and Peter Fray report on a scheme to support students entering the workplace, specifically in journalism, in Australia. Their work is interested in how students approach technology – a key issue for a ‘tech-drenched’ education field. Next, a team working on a large scale digital storytelling project, combining ‘live’ theatrical performance with video. Natalie Underberg-Goode, Edwanna Andrews, Mike Burke, Amanda Hill, Elizabeth Brendel Horn, Natasha Jones and Stephanie Wheeler’s work seeks to reflect and celebrate diversity on US university campuses. From Italy, Luca Botturi brings us eight case-studies on media literacy in schools, where he advocates an ‘individualised’ approach. In a similar vein, but more focused on social media, Allison Butler’s research finds that young people aged between 14–21, have an alarming lack of critical awareness online, and calls for quite a major media literacy intervention, very familiar to those of us who have been reading our journal for the last ten years. In our final full article, Jacqueline Harding’s study uses news to deepen to enrich academic and critical thinking in her students. In this work, she is particularly interested in students who are making the often-difficult transition to secondary/high school. Lastly, in our only ‘Research Forum’ piece this issue, Jessica Mendoza, Seungyeon Lee and Ian M. McDonough write about what happens when young people are separated from their mobile/cell phones. They use the term ‘nomophobia’ to describe the high anxiety students feel when they are effectively disconnected from the online world. Our book review this issue is by Stephen Andriano-Moore, who is reading Phil Wood and Joan Smith’s *Educational Research: Taking the Plunge*.

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