

Ease of Access and Uncomplicated Truth of Social Media: Why critical media literacy is needed (now, more than ever)¹

Allison Butler, University of Massachusetts Amherst, US

Keywords: Critical media literacy, Youth social media use, Social media, Media privacy

Abstract

Drawing from a small-scale qualitative study with young people, aged 14-21, this article illustrates their lack of critical awareness of major components of their social media, including access, data gathering, and corporate ownership. While these young people are savvy – and near constant – users of social media, their stories show a lack of knowledge of how these sites operate within the larger mainstream media landscape. These youth users see social media as designed for personal use and enjoyment, not as businesses; they develop their own rules of engagement, without considering the data they are sharing or the digital footprint they are building. This article argues that this gap of knowledge is fertile ground for a critical media literacy intervention.

Introduction

In November 2016, just after the contentious United States Presidential Election, the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG) released the findings from their nearly two year study on young people's ability to evaluate news and current events. They write, 'Overall, young people's ability to reason about the information on the internet can be summed up in one word: bleak' (Wineberg, McGrew, et al, 2016). Middle school students were unable to distinguish between news/information and advertisements; high school students were unable to recognize point of view or bias; and college students were unaware of who owns or runs certain websites. The researchers observe, 'Many assume that because young people are fluent in social media they are equally savvy about what they find there' (Wineberg, McGrew, et al). Fluent use, it turns out, does not translate to sophisticated knowledge.

In the space between perceived savviness and 'bleak' evidence is where young people engage with social media. Through sharing findings from a small-scale, qualitative study on youth social media use, this article shows how this gap is fertile ground to engage critical media literacy, to bridge the gap between an absence of knowledge and a more complex way to address

media use. For the most part, American youth do not have the experience of formal critical media literacy in their K-12 classrooms and the ability to critically assess main-stream and alternative media is conspicuously absent in young people today.

In addition to being able to access, analyze, and produce media (Aufderheide, 1993), the student of critical media literacy is taught to explore the political economy of mainstream, corporate media, including questions of ownership, distribution, and production, which entails a careful examination of power (Butler, 2016; Kellner & Share, 2007; Yousman, 2016). As defined by Kellner and Share (2007), critical media literacy ‘focuses on ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of critical dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality; incorporating alternative media production; and expanding textual analysis to include issues of social content, control, and pleasure’ (8). What distinguishes the critical of critical media literacy is its explicit focus on demystifying and deconstructing dominant ideology and power. Students of critical media literacy learn not just how to make sense of content and representation, but also explore ‘behind the scenes’ of mainstream media. Yousman (2016) states that critical media literacy is not ‘media bashing’ and does not tell students what to think. Rather, critical media literacy invites students to ‘view media in a more informed way and consider alternative ways of thinking about the media they use’ (372). Critical media literacy guides students to engage in a process of continuous critical inquiry regarding a wide variety of media texts and invites them to think beyond the content of dominant mainstream media choices. Critical media literacy challenges students to think beyond their comfort and pleasure with media and to regularly interrogate their choices.

The young people who participated in this research have not experienced critical media literacy in their school or in community activities in which they participate². These participants believe that ‘everyone’ has access to any media of their choosing and have a thin understanding of how social media operate in the larger corporate media landscape. They know they enjoy and love how convenient and entertaining media can be, but they are, for the most part, unclear on how this convenience and entertainment came to occupy such a monumental role in their lives or who controls the sites or the data they provide. Drawing on conversations with young people about their social media use, this article shares their words to highlight the space where critical media literacy can intervene and strengthen young people’s awareness and understanding of mainstream media.

Current State of Social Media Use

We live in a time where social media seem as if they are ubiquitous. So entrenched is our online, digital media, especially in the United States, it is difficult – if not impossible – to imagine life without them, even though they have only been a part of our lives for a short while.

Despite our near constant use of them, we know very little about how social media operate.

A primary concern with social media is the stripping away of individual privacy as users share personal data with little to no knowledge of the implications. In Goodman's (2015) analysis of the complex behind-the-scenes workings of the internet and social media, he uses a metaphor of burglary to point out how much we give away, without challenge:

In today's world, hackers are living unfettered and free inside your very own data systems for months and months, watching, waiting, lurking, and pillaging everything from your passwords to work projects to old selfies ... If any of us noticed a burglar in our home watching over us as we slept or filming us in the shower, we would immediately dial 911 ... In cyber-space, this is a daily occurrence, yet most of us remain calmly, even blissfully unaware of the threat, despite our deep vulnerabilities and the bad guys looming over us as we sleep (17).

Social media have become a precisely detailed accounting of daily life; everything shared or clicked, every photo posted or site "liked" or linked, are data. Once we publish that data, it is no longer ours to control (Goodman; Pasquale, 2015). A permanent digital footprint is imprinted, which creates an unequal power relationship between user and provider. Users give up and give away a trove of information, and those to whom it is given share little to nothing of themselves in return (Goodman; Pasquale).

Many users are not aware that the convenience of social media comes at a price. This lack of awareness is problematic: Social media products are 'free' because we do not associate the material we share or the advertisements we see with labor. Users willingly do the work for the social media sites to keep the content full to bursting and always growing (Giroux, 2015; Goodman; Pasquale; Schneier, 2015).

By signing up for various social media sites, users are bound to terms of service that are legally binding, generally favor the corporate provider (Goodman, 2015), and are written in a complicated way to intentionally obfuscate the average reader (deAbreu, 2016). Privacy policies are nearly illegible documents. Facebook's, for example, was initially 1004 words; as of 2014, it was 9300 words, with links to various sub-policies, 50 different settings, 170 options, and any time Facebook makes a change to the policy, all users are automatically returned to the default setting, which is a 'maximum level of openness' "(Goodman, 2015: 58). Users must agree to companies' terms in full, or not engage with the sites at all. Within the current social media realm, there are no options for alternate privacy settings or limits to data sharing; it is all or nothing. It is possible that most 'average' users are doing nothing wrong, and therefore have nothing to hide and no real reason to be concerned about what is being shared online, but a key

concern is that users do not know they are being watched (Pasquale, 2015).

These days, we cannot ‘turn off’ our social media accounts. Data are saved even if accounts are deactivated; friends on social media still attempt to tag us; our credit cards still track our purchases; and our smartphones may know our every location (Goodman, 2015). Corporate owners control so much of the internet landscape, they also control access to any competition they deem threatening (Pasquale, 2015). The convenience, ease, and instantaneous joy associated with social media use entrenches it within the neoliberal ethos that rewards hyperindividualism. McChesney (2013) argues that the ‘tremendous democratic potential’ of the internet has been undermined (5); in place of democracy is an inextricable connection to capitalism and a desire for unfettered profit. Despite doing the bulk of the work, it is not the laborers who profit. McChesney argues, ‘class and inequality are built into the system’s DNA’ because ‘the system of making profits is predicated upon paying labor as little as possible’ (29). Instead, users are paid in ‘likes’, the currency of social media approval.

These concerns are a particular issue for youth users. Sites aimed at children and young adults collect an extraordinary quantity of data on their users. To attract and capture malleable users, *more* data is collected from youth-targeted sites than those targeted to adults (Goodman, 2015). The systems in place to protect children are weak, at best. The Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), first proposed in 1999 by the Federal Trade Commission, limits the information that can be collected on children under the age of 13, but the protection is ‘blatantly violated on a routine basis’ because the data ‘are worth the risk ... given the exorbitant rewards’ (Goodman, 2015: 54-55)”. COPPA is designed to protect children up to the age of 13; there are no formal protections for children over the age of 13. According to Matecki (2013), COPPA is relatively spineless and puts an unreasonable onus on parents/guardians. Suggested methods for personal protection include:

Providing a consent form to be signed by parents and then returned to website operators by fax; requiring a parent to use a credit card in a transaction, with the reasoning that children under the age of thirteen do not have access to credit cards; having a parent call a toll-free number staffed by personnel trained to recognize voice differences between children and adults; and using digital certificates based on available technology to verify age (377).

Parents/guardians are complicit largely out of their own lack of knowledge of social media and data mining. According to Livingstone (2015a), parents’ interest in home-based regulation of media use is predicated on their ‘own familiarity with digital media’ (blogs.lse.ac.uk). Overall, parents seem to be in a state of deep confusion about how to approach their children’s

media use. At this stage, social media are so different from what most parents/guardians grew up with, it is uncharted territory for traditional structures and boundaries (Livingstone 2015c).

It is also challenging to figure out how young people engage with their media and what impact it might have on their development. According to Jensen and Nutt (2015), 'Today's teenagers and twenty-somethings make up the first generation of young people exposed to such a breathtaking number of electronic distractions' which may have an impact on brain development, especially for the easily stimulated, easily distracted, pleasure-seeking adolescent brain (206). Despite what challenges this level of technology may pose, non-involvement is not seen as a viable option. According to James' (2014) analysis of youth media use, 'online social networks are essential sites for participation in peer life – to many youths, having a Facebook, Tumblr, or Twitter account does not feel optional' (31). Even when they have to sign away their privacy, they do so with the knowledge that to not do so is to restrict them from a primary form of socializing. Despite this plethora of negative data, what young people do with their social media is not that different from what youth have done for generations. According to Livingstone (2015b), 'first and foremost, what people do, what people have always done, is talk. They talk all the time – they talk intimately, they talk in groups, they talk to people they hate, they talk to everyone, they talk to no one, they talk to themselves. It's what makes us human' (blogs.lse.ac.uk).

Adolescent identity development is not easy and young people can get lost in a moral and ethical quagmire of social media with few clear boundaries or restrictions. According to James (2014), 'Young people's decision making about [moral and ethical] issues was certainly not thoughtless. However, the thinking in which they engaged was often deeply self-focused – that is, what might I gain or lose from a given choice?' (10). They see social media as inherently their purview and are largely unaware of corporate control.

Young people do appear to value privacy, but from their parents/guardians and known authority figures, not necessarily from the corporate owners of their social media sites and apps. James (2014) writes that young people think about privacy in 'largely conventional ways', illustrated through controlling content about themselves, not about questioning corporate media's role (30). In general, young people constructed privacy parameters through careful editing, posting, and sharing (James, 2014) largely developed through informal rules established by their peer circles (Heitner, 2017; Vincent, 2016).

Big corporations know an awful lot about us – and we, very little about them (Bartlett, 2015). According to deAbreu (2016), questions of privacy and big data gathering 'are a borderless issue' and education is necessary (blogs.lse.ac.uk). Young people, their families, and communities deserve a more clear awareness and understanding of this material. In talking with a small selection of young people about their social media use, I learned that the majority

of them are regular social media users, on a variety of sites, who rarely, if ever, shut their communication 'off'. They have limited knowledge of corporate ownership, the implications of data mining, or how large their digital footprint is. Echoing the SHEG (2016) research, these youths are fluent users, but have little knowledge of the structure of their choices. Education in the form of critical media literacy may support and enhance youth knowledge of the choices they make on a daily basis.

Methods

Over the course of two years, I interviewed 39 young people, aged 16-21, from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds in both small group and private interviews³. At the time of the interviews, all participants lived in Massachusetts. The participants were accessed through personal and professional connections at local public high schools, private schools, and after-school programs. Youth were initially interviewed as part of larger focus groups and were invited to participate in private interviews. Demographic data, including race/ethnicity, gender, and economic status, is self-reported and all identifying information has been coded to protect confidentiality⁴. I interviewed 33 white youths, 6 youths of color, 15 female, 12 male, and 12 youths who identified as gender non-conforming, queer, or trans. While the ethnic breakdown is skewed largely towards white youths, this is reflective of the population of Massachusetts, which is 82% white (census.gov). Nearly all participants were avid users of social media, on multiple platforms, and acknowledged near constant use.

In focus groups, I asked young people to share with each other and me their definitions of media and discuss how and why they use media. They were asked about social media sites and their own use of social media. Groups were asked to discuss the perceived benefits and drawbacks of social media and how they might explain social media to adults. In individual interviews, I asked participants to share more in-depth analyses of their own social media use as well as their life interests and goals. Because social media is primarily associated with youth, I asked them about their thoughts on rules and policies with social media as well as their feelings about privacy, security, secrecy, and publicity on social media.

All focus groups and private interviews were digitally recorded and were transcribed by undergraduate and independent research assistants⁵. The transcripts were reviewed by undergraduate and graduate students⁶ and discussed with me. I met with the coders in independent consultations to match and review themes and share our interpretations. The coders were closer in age and life experiences to the participants and were able to teach me about the use and sense making discussed by the participants. I asked the readers to code and analyze the transcripts by theme and to look for both what the participants said as well as what might be absent from the conversation. I wanted to listen both to what was said as well as what

might be missing: What do young people know and not know about their social media use? All the coders had been educated in critical media theory and practice and were able to see the conspicuous absence of critical analyses in the participants' sense making. Listening to the gaps in the participants' ability to discuss the structure and assumptions of social media sites and apps led me to see this space as rich for critical media literacy learning.

The focus group and private interviews are examined through McRobbie's (1982/1991) argument that questions asked in scholarship 'are always informed by the historical moment we inhabit – not necessarily directly or unambiguously, but in more subtle ways' (121). The interviews, which took place between 2014-2016, live in the context of an ever-expanding reliance upon social media by young people. They occurred before the 2016 U.S. presidential election and its aftermath, and before 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' were part of our daily conversation. This research is qualitative in method and makes no claim to generalize to a larger youth population. It does, however, occupy a moment in time and shares the struggles of particular young people as they work to stake their claim in an unstable, shifting environment that encourages them to share every detail of their lives, at all times. It is also implicitly American: The young people interviewed are all American citizens who have been raised within the largest corporate media system on the globe. In general, they believe the media to which they have access are the same media, with the same content, that youth have access to around the globe. They did not at any time question the structure or organization of media systems or stop to think that other countries might organize their media in any different way.

Though my goal was not to embarrass them, many participants were chagrined when they realized how little they understood of the ownership and control of the social media sites they used so regularly. However, they quickly shrugged off any struggle or embarrassment when they admitted that while much of what we were discussing was 'creepy' and 'weird', there was really no way out. For the most part, they experience a great deal of joy in their social media use and concerns about what information they might be missing are fleeting at best.

Using social media is intrinsically part of young people's lives – yet talking about this use is not a regular conversation. In order to talk with young people about their normal, everyday lives, I asked them to look at their choices and actions from a critical distance. The participants engage with other youth – including many of their fellow focus group participants – regularly on social media, but they do not regularly talk about how they use their media. Many participants acknowledged they did not realize how much time they spent with social media until we started talking about it.

Their fleeting concern with the ownership and control of their postings and their lack of awareness about how much time they spend on social media is concerning. It also marks the spot where critical media literacy can intervene. Buckingham (2000) argues, 'it is clearly naïve

to believe that we can ever take the child's perspective – or that this perspective is something which will simply be revealed to us if we ask the right questions' (117). The purpose of this work is to take the opportunity to illustrate a space where critical media literacy can provide young people with greater understanding and multidimensional awareness of their regular media use. By providing young people with formal, regular opportunities to learn more fully about their media choices, they may become more aware of the environment in which they are living and be more prepared to make change.

Discussion: Access & Absence of Critical Awareness

Two of the biggest revelatory conversations in the focus groups and private interviews revolved around access to social media and absence of critical assessment of social media. As I listened to how the participants explained their use of social media, I realized they assumed all people utilized a variety of social media. The more I probed this belief, the more I learned the participants did not know why social media were so popular or so invasive in their lives and had limited understanding of the corporate control of social media sites.

There is a general assumption among the participants that everyone has access to social media. There are some caveats to this belief, such as age or ownership of certain devices, but for the most part, unfettered access to social media is perceived to be the norm. As expressed by the following participants, access is easy:

Sam (16, male, white, upper class):

Anyone that wants it – it's that accessible these days. I can't say for certain that I know anybody that's said to me, 'I'm not on social media,' they might be and I don't know.

Katie (16, female, white, upper class):

I think anyone with a phone or computer, kids like in fifth grade have Instagram, so I think really anyone can have social media.

Colby (16, male, African American, upper class):

Everyone, even little kids. When I was a little kid, I didn't have social media and everything I learned was from my parents. Kids are getting knowledgeable nowadays and learning things earlier, but they might not be learning the right things because sometimes you can see some false things on social media that are just opinionated.

Brian (17, male, white, upper class):

I would definitely say that it has turned into a thing that everybody has nowadays. I'd definitely say that most people have one, if not multiple, accounts and they keep up on them almost every day.

Based on the participants' assertions, 'anyone' and 'everyone' has access to whatever social media they choose. With 2 billion people online as of 2011 and 1.3 billion Facebook users in its first 10 years (Goodman, 2015), it is hard to imagine people not connected to the internet. As observed by Sam, young people might not even know people not on social media. Colby expresses limited concern that children might not be learning 'the right things', but this is the only caution expressed. The participants were on various social media sites – Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat especially – and they were able to connect with their friends, make new friends, and keep up with the social happenings of their schools and communities. It is hard to argue against the 'anyone' and 'everyone' belief when young people know no one without social media.

Only one participant spoke about how this access to and use of social media might be different outside the United States. Isola, a 16-year-old white, middle class female, believes that 'anyone who has a device has the access', and continues, 'they might not use it depending on their age group or where you live in the world. I feel like we are one of the countries that's a lot more into it than a lot of other places, just based on like a million factors.' Her acknowledgement that users in the United States may be different than users from other countries is one of the only iterations of global issues in the focus group and private interviews. Yet, her generalization – 'just based on like a million factors' – reveals a lack of awareness of how mainstream media are structured.

This lack of awareness invites the participants to slip into the ideology of neoliberalism that rewards them for their individual efforts. McChesney (2013) argues that most analyses of the internet fail to explore its connection to capitalism. Social media sites encourage near constant consumption and participation by users and the sites are so user-friendly, it is easy to forget they are part of mainstream corporate culture. When asked who has access to social media, Maddie, a 17-year-old middle class, white female, answers, 'Everyone', and then elaborates:

Because you get on the computer you don't even have to have an account you can just get on. For the normal, average person that isn't crazy high tech, you might not be able to find much if someone is deep down secretly trouble. If you go to images and type in my name, my Instagram pictures will come up and so will the pictures of people I follow. That's weird for me because someone could do that and someone that I'm zero

percent associated with, maybe they post a bad picture that I'm not even in or I wasn't even there and I didn't even know that they posted it but that could still come up. So that part I definitely don't like.

Though she 'definitely' does not like the surveillance of social media, Maddie sees no reason to change her usage. As intimated through many comments, other people do good or bad things and this is not a compelling reason to change one's own behavior or change one's interactions with social media.

For the most part, participants believe that social media share unfiltered truth; they are seen as sites with minimal to no spin. According to Thor, an 18-year-old, upper class white male, social media has changed our ability to access truth:

I think a lot of social media has also raised the veil of what really goes on. It's getting the raw information from places that we can't and don't usually see. It just goes to show how we can communicate with anybody from around the world. And how we get the true information now versus 60 years ago when we just had what was on the radio and what was coming on TV.

His understanding of social media carries with it the assumption that all postings are truth and because users have greater access and control in posting, the options for real data are limitless. And yet, there are so many examples of false social media sites and faked content, designed to inflame readers (Shane & Goel, 2017; Shane & Isaac, 2017; Wakabayashi & Shane, 2017). There seem to be fewer barriers to the truth because of the belief that users have control over the content in a different way than from traditional broadcast media. Though he does recognize that social media can be used to obfuscate information, he believes it is a self-correcting system:

On the other side of that, I also think there's a degree of accountability. Going through the college process, I know schools were looking at my Twitter, they were looking at my Facebook, and I know that I'm going to have a better chance as a student getting into a school than someone that has posted pictures of, I don't know, getting drunk or high or whatever. So, in that regard, society is picking who is the better human being, who is doing the right things. I mean, same thing with politicians, too, you know, younger politicians have started using social media. Anthony Wiener, obviously, was one of them. Terrible. But, it created accountability, and then he ended up resigning. So, it's also helping there, too. It's gotten rid of the bad and promoted the good, I think.

His belief is that individual behavior choices matter and one's online behavior illustrates who is a good (or bad) person. Echoing James' (2014) research, he has the self-focused belief that colleges are perusing his social media sites and determining that he is a better person based on what he shares on social media.

This concept of individual choice is heard from multiple participants. Meg, an 18-year-old upper class white female, and Maddie, both see social media as largely about individual choice. If anyone's personal information is shared, it is most likely the user's choice to share the data:

Meg: Well, if you say where you are, I think you are consenting to people knowing where you are, but if you don't say it then you don't really consent to people having that information about you, and I think that's scary if you don't really plan on people knowing that.

Maddie: It's not just teenagers on social media not being smart. I mean obviously we make mistakes on it because that happens but you just have to make rules for yourself, like if I do not want my grandmother to know this then don't post it. I don't even retweet or favorite things that have swears in them. That's a rule for me. I don't favorite, retweet, or come in contact with anything that has to do with drugs, alcohol, swearing. But I also can't speak for the entire population of teenagers because you have to recognize that there's many different kids that have been brought up in many different environments that are maybe not as educated.

The absence of regulation is something young people are familiar with and with an emphasis on individual use, users can make up their own rules for themselves and their social media behavior. Behavioral choices are good or bad based on individual choice and social learning.

There is no expressed awareness that the systems of social media may be set up in such a way as to most effectively and efficiently gather and share their data. The participants are comfortable with the presumed normalcy of being constantly online and being regularly monitored. Both Brian and Chelsea question the surveillance of social media, but accept it as normal:

Brian: Sometimes I wonder 'what does this company know about me', like why do I keep getting their advertisements? Does Facebook tell them everything, is that why I'm getting their advertisements? I do think about that and I do wonder about that, so that's kind of the part I don't understand. I don't want to say I ignore it, but I do.

Chelsea: I think it gets really into the conversation of Big Brother watching, but I don't think there's really any way to escape it, unless you don't have a cell phone at all, because all cell phones are tracked, they have cameras at gas stations, they have cameras everywhere, so mostly everywhere you go, you're being recorded, so unless you live in the woods, there's someone always watching anyway.

Chelsea is unable to articulate anything specific about who 'they' may be and Brian chooses to ignore his discomfort. This comfort with being uncomfortable is part of the experience of social media: To not participate is not a choice, so for Brian and Chelsea this is the reality that must just be accepted. They become complicit because they see no other option.

There was minimal conversation and less awareness of social media being used for social justice. Spectrum, a 17-year-old, mixed race, working class youth who is gender nonconforming, struggled to find the social justice possibilities of social media. They believed that social media could be used for social justice purposes, but when asked to clarify, admitted, 'Hard to say, but I've heard it buzzing around. And sometimes it's negative involvement.' These young people hear about social movements, but are not necessarily clear on how to participate, beyond liking posts or pages. They recognize that social media could be used for 'more', but are unable to articulate what, exactly. As a gender-nonconforming individual with unsupportive parents, Spectrum keeps their gender explorations to themselves and lives a dual life: Assigned gender at home, true self – with no strict gender assignation – at school, online, and at their after-school youth program. Many of the gender non-conforming, trans, and queer participants use social media as a way to connect with other youth through shared struggles. Often these struggles are kept within the realm of private chats and blog conversations and not with any structured connection to social justice movements offline. To move offline is perceived for some participants as too risky, a threat to the fragile compartments they have created that keep their home, school, and real selves safe. A further contradiction to be noted is that even if young people use social media to participate in social justice movements, they must do so within the corporate controlled social media environment. This struggle was acknowledged by none of the participants.

Many of the participants acknowledge they spend a significant portion of their day on social media, but cannot articulate why or for what purpose. Brian, whose favorite app is Snapchat, which he says he is on '90% of the time I'm on my phone', cannot articulate why, 'I have no clue. I downloaded it a year ago and I've just been using it constantly.' By using social media sites without really knowing why, or with any thought to implications, they fulfill the sites' need to have participants do all the labor to keep the sites full of constantly updated data, which echoes McChesney's (2013) concerns about capitalist connections. This behavior is

considered normal and they expect it of themselves as well as their peers.

This lack of awareness plays itself out in how the participants negotiate their own privacy parameters. Some participants feel that if they make certain types of postings on certain sites, they can keep their information away from unwanted attention. Dylan, an 18-year-old, middle class, white male asks the members of his focus group:

Does anyone else try to do selective posting? Like, maybe you took a photo of yourself that you don't want on your Facebook but you don't mind people seeing on your Instagram for example? Cuz I do that, I'll post pictures that I don't want on Facebook on Tumblr or Instagram but I don't want them right on my Facebook page that has the majority of people on it.

'Selective posting' is a way to control the message; for most of the participants, this means keeping certain data – photos, likes, groups, posts – separate from their parents/guardians. What is missing is any discussion or awareness of who has access to their content, beyond their control. While they restrict the messages from their parents/guardians and people they perceive to be in a position of authority, they cannot control how the corporate owner utilizes their content and this knowledge is beyond their scope of awareness.

Similar to 'selective posting', participants also have specific sites where they post 'bad' or inappropriate activities, operating under the belief that the temporary nature of Snapchat, for example, will protect them from getting caught. As Isola explains:

I think Snapchat is the place where, like if I am doing something wrong, I'll send people individual snapchats. I don't do it that often. Like if I'm at a party – 'cause that kinda covers all grounds of what might be bad – I'll send my friend a picture, 'Oh you should come, it's a good vibe' or whatever. I guess that would be the medium where people generally share stuff like that 'cause the sense that it's temporary makes it feel a lot safer.

Isola operates under the belief that Snapchat postings are temporary. While the message is temporary on the phone screen, and the individual SnapStory disappears, this is literally just on the surface. The stories are digitally archived and any Snapchat post adds to one's permanent digital footprint. What they are not aware of is that all their posts are data for the corporate owner who, at least algorithmically, collects and saves their data on a continuous basis.

When asked about how to trust social media sites, the participants were largely unable to employ any critical skills to measure their trust of websites. Instead, as illustrated through Maddie, sites are trusted because they are well known. She says, 'I think that's why you should

use social media that you trust and not random websites.' When asked to clarify her trust, she responded, 'I don't know. I feel like because it's a very well known thing so it's not a random website. You just have to be very aware and that's why if there's some big serious thing, I'll call the person or I'll be like, "let's FaceTime about this.'" Sites are trusted because the names are familiar and, for the most part, this is where they congregate with their friends. There is a tautological rationality employed: What they are on is what their friends are on, which means the sites are familiar to their cohort, which makes them trustworthy. However, there remains no discussion or awareness of corporate control. Maddie believes that because she and her cohort are on the same sites, and the sites are well known, there is nothing to worry about. FaceTime is treated as the equivalent of a face-to-face conversation with no discussion of possible monitoring or data gathering.

In general, the participants are not aware of who is responsible for keeping social media sites secure. Maya, a 17-year-old white, upper class girl is not aware of how sites protect themselves or their users. When asked who is responsible for security on social media, she responded, 'Yeah, I don't know. Probably the website. I don't even know where I would find information about that, and like I know you can be hacked, but I don't really know how it works.' She has no knowledge of safety or security measures online and assumes the power and responsibility belongs with the website, specifically to keep out hackers.

A common thread throughout the interviews is that social media are simply there, available for young people's use and enjoyment at any time. There is no demonstrated knowledge of social media as businesses, as companies with corporate and profit interests. To leave young people in this space is unethical and critical media literacy scholars can do more.

Conclusion

These young people are actively involved in multiple academic and extracurricular activities at their schools. The college-bound youth are headed to prestigious, competitive universities. Their ability to navigate, utilize, and quickly adapt to the always morphing, ever complicated social media landscape points to a high level of technological fluency. However, their inability to recognize or grasp the corporate motivations and functionality of these social media as products for companies is worrying. The lack of awareness is not a question of intelligence or ability; it is a question of what young people are being offered as tools to learn about the ubiquitous mainstream media business.

Critical media literacy is not a panacea and it is difficult to point to clear, unequivocal research that shows its efficacy. While there is a lot of scholarship on what media literacy is and its perceived value, there is limited research that shows that media literacy interventions can change certain behaviors (Fingar & Jolls, 2013; Jeong, Cho & Hwang, 2012). It is clear from this

small-scale study as well as from the larger SHEG (2016) research that there is a conspicuous lack of knowledge on how social media operate and the deeper role that young people play in social media content construction, which sets up the main constituents – youth users – as uninformed and potentially more easily duped by mainstream media systems. What critical media literacy offers, with its explicit exploration of power, is the opportunity for young people to develop formal skills to access and analyze their media choices from a position of critical inquiry.

Given the opportunity to learn how to critically assess their media choices, including but not limited to the ability to access, analyze, and produce media, as well as analyze and critique the current, dominant mainstream/corporate media culture, I have no doubt these young people would do so with great acumen. These young people possess a great deal of colloquial knowledge about the media and are regular users of a variety of media. Yet, they have no formal training – in school or community work – in critically assessing mainstream or independent media. With critical media literacy also promoting the exploration of mainstream, corporate media, regarding questions of ownership, distribution, and production, it would in turn encourage social and political progression for the future generation. Critical media literacy may not change their media use, but it can absolutely add to their awareness and understanding of mainstream media

The United States is behind other countries – especially Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom – in its implementation of media literacy into classrooms (Buckingham, 2000; Domaille & Buckingham, 2001; Tyner, 2015). Implementation of media literacy in the United States remains piecemeal at best. The integration of critical media literacy into classrooms needs to be formally codified with teacher training (Butler & Ladd, 2016), research into goals and assessment (Scharrer, 2002) and, in this author's opinion, must include interrogation of the power of mainstream media's power (Butler, 2016; Yousman, 2016). As demonstrated by the young people's stories in this article, they are fluid users of social media, but do not have the formal vocabulary to analyze their media use or how it fits into the larger media landscape. In the era of post-truth and alternative facts as part of our daily parlance, and where social media connections are becoming more, not less, entrenched in our daily lives, now is the time to bring critical media literacy to the forefront of our conversations on pedagogy.

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Endnotes

1. Thanks to the Interdisciplinary Studies Institute, the Massachusetts Society of Professors, the Social and Behavioral Sciences Dean's office, and the Department of Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst for generously funding and supporting this research.
2. Participants matriculated at the private boarding school attended 1 to 2 full school assemblies on digital citizenship, each about 1 hour, which introduced questions of media

literacy, but they do not have any regular coursework in critical media literacy.

3. This article draws on data from a larger project, from the University of Massachusetts Amherst's Inter-disciplinary Studies Institute's 2015-2016 fellowship on the theme of Privacy, Secrecy, Security, and Publicity.
4. All participants chose their own code names. Identifying information – including any reference to any social media account – has been altered to protect participant confidentiality. Economic status was based on participant self-reporting. All participants also shared their pronouns, which are used in this article. 'They/them/theirs' is used for individual participants who do not identify as 'he' or 'she'.
5. Special thanks to Patricia Camerota, Kat Good-Schiff, and Isabel Mitchell for transcription work.
6. Special thanks to Patricia Camerota, Mary Harnois, Mike Krieger, and Isabel Mitchel for reviewing, coding, and discussing transcripts.