Gatekeeping Practices of Participants in a

Digital Media Literacy Massive Open Online Course (MOOC)

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved April 2018 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2018

ABSTRACT

Long before "fake news" dominated the conversation within and about the media, media literacy advocates have championed the need for media literacy education that provides the tools for people to understand, analyze, and evaluate media messages. That the majority of U.S. adults now consume news on social media underscores the importance for students of all ages to be critical users of media. Furthermore, the affordances of social media to like, comment, and share news items within one's network increases an individual's responsibility to ascertain the veracity of news before using a social media megaphone to spread false information. Social media's shareability can dictate how information spreads, increasing news consumers' role as a gatekeeper of information and making media literacy education more important than ever.

This research examines the media literacy practices that news consumers use to inform their gatekeeping decisions. Using a constant comparative coding method, the author conducted a qualitative analysis of hundreds of discussion board posts from adult participants in a digital media literacy Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) to identify major themes and examine growth in participants' sense of responsibility related to sharing news information, their feeling of empowerment to make informed decisions about the media messages they receive, and how the media literacy tools and techniques garnered from the MOOC have affected their daily media interactions. Findings emphasize the personal and contextual nature of media literacy, and that those factors must be addressed to ensure the success of a media literacy education program.

DEDICATION

To those who dedicate their lives to helping others through education, particularly the educators who work with our youngest and most vulnerable populations: you are the heroes of our world. May you continue to shine your light and give your love, compassion, and knowledge, despite the challenges. As my first teaching mentor always said: Keep fighting the good fight. The seeds you plant will grow to be the dreams, ideas, and innovations that will sustain us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Operational definitions

Digital literacies	Taking a sociocultural view of literacies situates media literacy as one of many of a family of social practices needed to effectively navigate today's digital society known as digital literacies. In this framework, literacies are defined as social practices that allow us to "generate and communicate meanings and to invite others to make meaning from our texts in turn" (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).
Gatekeeping	Gatekeeping is defined by Shoemaker and Voss (2009) as "the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day… (p. 1)." Those who act as gatekeepers are mediators who turn an enormous amount of information into a more manageable number of media messages distributed to the public (Shoemaker and Voss, 2009). In traditional gatekeeping theory, the process of gatekeeping as utilized by journalists and media organizations is one that has been informed and refined by professional practices, norms, and routines, with the decisions made throughout the process being referred to as 'gates' and those making the decisions to transmit the information the 'gatekeepers'. This model emphasizes the media's control over information and the one-way flow of information.
	In the 21st century, however, as digital and, especially, social media have become increasingly popular ways to share information, the process of gatekeeping has been co-opted by individuals who, either through acts of their own media creation or through social news sharing activities, perform gatekeeping duties that can play a significant a role in the dissemination of news (Silverman, 2016; Albright, 2017).
	For the purposes of this dissertation, the term 'gatekeeping' is used to describe the process regardless of who is doing it. In some cases, gatekeeping will be qualified by a descriptor such as 'audience,' 'individual,' or 'media' to delineate the person or entity engaged in the act of gatekeeping. In this updated model, media organizations do not have exclusive control over the decisions being made to turn pieces of information into news, nor do they control the dissemination of information. In today's model, technology

	and news users share in the responsibility of disseminating information, a practice that is informed by a variety of unclear motivations and routines.
Media literacy	Media literacy is commonly defined as the ability to understand, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1997). Updates to this definition in the 21st century have added creation, reflection, and action to the list of ways in which people interact with media (Hobbs, 2011). In the book *Mediactive* and in the MediaLIT course, Gillmor describes media literacy as a lifelong learning process that should emphasize active participation. For the purposes of this research, media literacy is one of many literacies housed under a broader framework of digital literacies.
Media literacy practices	Literacy practices are "the general cultural ways of utilizing literacy" within different contexts and Discourses (Barton, 1991, p. 5; see also, Gee, 1999, Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). Street (1998) suggests that literacy practices can explain the larger systems in which literacy takes place in a community. Media literacy practices, then, are defined in this analysis as the ways in which participants utilize and interact with media – in this case, specifically news media – and the tools and competencies used to make meaning from media messages.
Massive Open Online Course (MOOC); xMOOC; cMOOC	Free, not-for-credit, web-based learning experiences that present information on a wide variety of topics to people interested in advancing their knowledge. There are two main types of MOOCs: xMOOCs and cMOOCs. The term xMOOC refers to instructor-driven, lecture-based courses. In contrast, cMOOCs focus on fostering a community of learners through active student participation.
Social news sharing	The practice of sharing news information with one's networks via social networking platforms like Facebook or Twitter.

Conceptual definitions

Aggregation	The process of collecting content from a variety of sources to view in one place. RSS feeds are information aggregators; social networking sites likes Twitter and Facebook can also act as aggregators for people who have added multiple information sources to their feeds.
Backfire effect	Introduced in the MediaLIT MOOC as a complementary term to confirmation bias, backfire effect is defined by Nyhan and Reifler (2010) as a tendency for people to entrench themselves even more strongly in a deeply-held conviction in the face of contradictory evidence.
Clickbait	Online content, especially headlines, images, and captions, used to attract attention and encourage people to click on a link to a specific story.
Confirmation bias	The tendency to seek out information and interpret it in such a way that supports one's existing beliefs. Confirmation bias can be exacerbated online because of filter bubbles perpetuated by social networks and technological algorithms.
Crap detection	Howard Rheingold (2009) uses this term to describe what people do with the information they receive online in order to determine its credibility. A number of tools and techniques are introduced in the MediaLIT course to help detect crap, which Rheingold defines as "information tainted by ignorance, inept communication, or deliberate deception."
Curation	Curation is the process of intentionally selecting the sources of information that will populate one's social media feeds, with the goal of having access to the information best suited to the individual. In the context of the MediaLIT MOOC, a carefully curated list of sources is one comprised of credible sources that represent a wide variety of perspectives.
Filter bubble	Eli Pariser (2011) defines filter bubbles as "the personalized universe that makes it into our [social media] feed."

Media/news consumers	As Gillmor describes in the MediaLIT MOOC, audiences for news and media information at one time were more passive consumers of news; in a one-way model of communication, information was disseminated from the media to consumers with little ability for feedback. Although the audience did engage in media-related activities in the past, it was not until networked media became widely available that there was an opportunity to "'talk back' in the same multimodal language that frames cultural products formerly made exclusively in studios" (van Dijck, 2009, p. 43). For the purposes of this research, media and news are often used interchangeably within the course and among MOOC participants, with "media" a word to describe information that may encompass more than hard news, and "news" defined as timely information that has broad impact or consequence.
Media/news users	In the 21st-century, Gillmor suggests in the MediaLIT MOOC that news consumers no longer only consume information, but also create and interact with it through activities as diverse as creating original content, blogging, commenting, and social news sharing. Thus, Gillmor argues a more appropriate term for the "people-formerly-known-as-consumers" (van Dijck, 2009) is "news users." Again, media and news are used interchangeably throughout the course and among MOOC participants.
Objectivity	A term used to describe the journalistic practice of covering all sides of a news story and not showing partiality or bias for one side over another. Objectivity in reporting has traditionally been associated with increased credibility.
Social media	Ouirdi et al. (2014) conceptualize social media as "a set of mobile and web-based platforms built on Web 2.0 technologies, and allowing users at the micro-, meso- and macro- levels to share and geo-tag user-generated content (images, text, audio, video and games), to collaborate, and to build networks and communities, with the possibility of reaching and involving large audiences" (p. 123). In relation to the definition for social networking sites, there is more emphasis on the user-generated content generated and shared in this ecosystem. However, the term "social media" may be used interchangeably with "social networks" or "social networking" by MediaLIT MOOC participants.

Social networking sites	Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social networking sites as "web-based services that allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, 2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site" (p. 211).
Transparency	In the context of the MediaLIT MOOC, transparency is defined as a journalistic practice of disclosing one's affiliations or personal connections to a story, as well as using hyperlinks to provide context for the reporting of a particular story.
Triangulation	A crap detection technique that involves finding three or more different sources for the same news to test a source's credibility.
Two-sides fallacy	A term used in the MediaLIT MOOC to describe the false notion that there are two equal sides to every story, a construct often employed in news reporting.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The digital media environment today is one in which people are bombarded by an endless stream of information from a variety of platforms, from websites to mobile applications to social networks. Media messages are continuously produced and distributed via technology tools that have become ubiquitous in our lives, extensions of our beings as we move through routine daily activities. As pervasive as digital technologies are, however, they themselves are only neutral tools subject to human understanding and action (Koltay, 2011). Since traditional media organizations started shifting content online in the 1990s (Boczkowski, 2005), the production and consumption of news has profoundly changed. The information stream is no longer one-way, from journalist to audience, nor are the means for producing and disseminating news controlled by the mass media. Making sense of all the media there is to see, hear, and watch requires a specialized set of competencies, what many scholars would refer to as new, or digital, literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). In contrast to a functional view of literacy, which suggests that literacy – as narrowly defined by the ability to read and write – is a skill that a person either has or does not have, new literacies are viewed as a sociocultural process that is inextricably linked to the values, norms, and cultures in which they are used (Street, 2003). Within the evolving new literacy studies frame, digital literacies is defined as participation in social practices that comprise a number of different literacies, from autonomous notions of literacy rooted in speaking, reading, and writing, to other types of literacy including information, news, and media literacy (Jones,

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2013). As the ways in which people consume and use media content change, so, too, must the characteristics and proficiencies traditionally associated with media literacy (Lin et al., 2013; Livingstone et al., 2008).

Though historically more concerned with examining potential harmful effects of media messages, interest in media literacy research has grown as a means to address the complexities of digital media use. Instead of focusing on how people are acted upon by media, mass communication and media studies researchers are examining the ways in which the digital landscape impacts how people use, consume, share, participate in, and make sense of media (Hobbs, 2011; Martens, 2010). Concurrently, scholars in such diverse fields as linguistics, literacy studies, information studies, political science, education, and psychology have been developing a broader picture of what it means to be literate in today's world. The concept of a singular literacy has developed into multiple literacies that are developed over a lifetime (Koltay, 2011). And though many have suggested that there is great opportunity for cross-disciplinary collaboration and investigation (Coiro et al., 2008; Hobbs, 2011; Tyner, 1998), research is just beginning to help bridge the gap between disparate theoretical, methodological, and epistemological perspectives (Coiro et al., 2008; Livingstone et al., 2008; Martens, 2010).

A widely cited definition of media literacy is the ability to understand, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1997). Hobbs' (2011) more current definition adds creation, reflection, and action to the list of ways in which people interact with media. Some media literacy research situates media literacy within or alongside other literacies, most notably information literacy; however, few

mass communication scholars have grounded their research in new literacy studies. What exists, then, is a solid body of mass communication research that analyzes the potential effects of media and the competencies required to make meaning of media messages, but that does not acknowledge the fact that media literacy is but one in a collection of literacies that people practice each day to navigate their world. Further, Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) argue that the current digital landscape necessitates a shift in approaches to media literacies that account for what Boyd (2017) describes as an era of "polarization, distrust, and self-segregation."

From a professional journalism perspective, Hermida (2012) begins to close the gap in media literacy research by arguing that "journalism practices can be understood as a set of literacies that are socially recognized ways of generating, communicating, and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in discourses" (p. 662). Utilizing a digital literacies theoretical framework (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008), Hermida argues that these literacies are informed by routines, rituals, and practices set by print journalism.

To further extend Hermida's framework of journalism as a literacy practice, it can be argued that the journalistic practice of gatekeeping is itself a literacy practice, one that is increasingly being co-opted by news consumers, those "formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006, n.p.) in a social news environment. Gatekeeping, which has been defined as the "process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day," is rooted in core journalistic tenets of news judgment, verification, and accuracy (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009, p. 1).

Journalists have traditionally been entrusted to watch the gates because they possess the requisite skills, which was easy enough to do when the mass media had great control over the flow of information. However, this is no longer the world we live in. Today's digital media environment has been described as one in which the gates have "multiplied beyond all control" (Bruns, 2006). Through participation practices such as creating and remixing content, commenting, sharing, and liking, media users regularly contribute to and share control of the flow of information. Gatekeeping has been described as a socially mediated process in which the gatekeeper imposes a set of values upon pieces of information to shape information that is shared (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). This raises the question: as citizens who are not trained on the principles of journalism take a more active role in the gatekeeping process in a digital environment, what literacy practices are informing their gatekeeping decisions? What skills, values, and traits are embedded in these decisions? Singer (2014) questioned but did not explore the criteria news users apply to their gatekeeping decisions and whether those criteria reflect journalistic norms, and several studies have examined media users' reasons and motivations for sharing information on social media (Beam et al., 2016; Lampe et al., 2010, Lee & Ma, 2012). And though several examples from the current media environment – in particular events surrounding the 2016 U.S. presidential election and an increased awareness of how bots spread misinformation – highlight the impact media users' gatekeeping practices can have on which stories get the most attention, little research has connected gatekeeping to media literacy. This gap in the research is significant because it can no longer be taken for granted that news information that garners the greatest visibility meets the highest

journalistic standards of transparency, accountability, accuracy, and credibility (Society of Professional Journalists). An analysis of gatekeeping as a literacy practice answers Shoemaker and Vos' (2009) call for increased understanding of the environmental changes shaping gatekeeping because it addresses gatekeeping from the perspective of the news user. As media users' power as gatekeepers of information grows, it becomes increasingly critical to examine the factors that motivate their gatekeeping decisions and how principles of media literacy influence those decisions.

This study aims to connect gatekeeping and media literacy by examining the media literacy practices that may inform gatekeeping decisions among participants in a digital media literacy Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). The chosen population for study is significant because it comprises two underrepresented areas in the media literacy literature that offer opportunities to expand media literacy research: adult learners and informal learning spaces. Though most media literacy research is grounded in education in some form, very little research occurs outside of K-12 classrooms. Traditionally, media literacy education has been treated as an inoculation, with learning outcomes measured following some learning intervention (Potter, 2010; Hobbs 2011). From that perspective, media literacy education is best conducted in a formal setting when learners are young, so they can continue to apply what they have learned throughout their lives (Potter, 2010). However, from a digital literacies perspective, media literacy is an ongoing practice that is shaped by context and community (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). Thus, ongoing media literacy education in different environments fosters growth throughout life and across experiences, both formal and informal. The vast majority of

MOOC users are adults—the median age of a typical MOOC student is less than 30 years old (Ho et al., 2014)—and do not earn formal credit for their participation, attributes that set MOOC users apart from typical media literacy research subjects.

The MOOC format itself has not been studied as an environment for media literacy education, though Muller (2009) states that a MOOC provides a space for students to "negotiate identity, language, understandings, and relationships for mutual learning and the synthesis of new ideas." Stewart (2013) contends that though few MOOCs explicitly aim to enhance digital literacies that Lankshear and Knobel (2007) describe as more "participatory, collaborative, and distributed," the inherent openness of the MOOC platform may make it an inadvertent goal. When designed as a cMOOC, which emphasizes discussion and community among participants, the MOOC is an effective platform for analysis because its constructivist properties foster social learning (Siemens, 2012a; Stephens & Jones, 2014). The large size and reach of a typical MOOC present unique opportunities for study. In just one course, researchers potentially have access to thousands of learners from around the world. Depending upon the scope of the course, a wide range of data can be extracted from course activities.

Dennis suggests that most media literacy education research explores K-12 education because media literacy is thought of as part of the socialization process (2004). Livingstone et al. (2005) note that the effectiveness of media literacy has rarely been tested in relation to informal or lifelong learning.

As part of the course design and instructional team for the media literacy MOOC that serves as the basis for this study, the researcher was involved in the process of

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determining course objectives, developing course content, creating course assignments, and monitoring participant discussion and progress. The resulting course, MediaLIT: Overcoming Information Overload, was offered by MOOC platform edX in July 2015.

Digital Media Literacy MOOC

MediaLIT: Overcoming Information Overload is a seven-week MOOC led by Dan Gillmor, internationally recognized media literacy author and professor of practice at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University. Based on Gillmor's 2010 book *Mediactive*, the course was designed to help participants gain a better understanding of how the media operate and to provide principles for being a more active and informed media user. Gillmor's approach to media literacy is one that emphasizes participation and creation, actions he contends lead to greater empowerment when it comes to media use (Gillmor, 2010). As such, course lectures and activities centered on creation-related media literacy principles, which also served to maximize collaboration among the thousands of participants from 149 countries who enrolled in the MOOC.

The educational objectives of the MediaLIT MOOC —including applying critical thinking skills to the evaluation of media messages and curating and creating media for others—align closely with established media literacy outcomes, making this course particularly well suited to be the subject of study. Course curriculum emphasized discussion in two main ways: discussion boards and blog posts. In both activities, participants were asked to share their thoughts on topics covered in the course or that were otherwise of interest to them, and to include hyperlinks to specific media examples

in their posts to help illustrate their points. In addition, course instructors encouraged participants to comment on other posts to foster more interaction and discussion within the course. I used the discussion that resulted from course activities—approximately 1,200 discussion board and blog posts ranging from about 50-300 words—as the basis for a qualitative analysis of the media literacy practices within the MOOC, with a goal of developing greater understanding of how media users engage in media literacy practices when acting as gatekeepers in a digital environment. Using a constant comparative method of analysis to allow themes to emerge from the data, I conducted several rounds of coding to identify media literacy practices being employed by MOOC participants and then to categorize commonly used media literacy practices into recurring themes for deeper examination. The corpus of commentary demonstrates the complex relationship participants have with the media they use, as well as the increased awareness of the responsibility professional media and media users have to think critically about the ways in which they engage with the media.

Media Literacy in an Age of Misinformation Abundance

The run-up to and aftermath of the contentious 2016 U.S. presidential election has epitomized the complicated state of digital information consumption, with the term "fake news" emerging as the catch-all phrase to describe the proliferation of misinformation online. Oxford Dictionaries chose "post-truth" as the 2016 word of the year, an adjective defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) characterize the post-2016 media landscape as framed by a

postmodern relativism driven by a demand for facts that "refute oppositional viewpoints" (p. 448). A survey conducted after the 2016 presidential election by Ipsos Public Affairs and BuzzFeed News found that American adults believe fake news headlines about 75% of the time and that those who cite Facebook as a major source of news are more likely to believe fake news headlines than those who do not (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). Similarly, a 2016 Pew Research Center study found that 64% of adults believe fake news stories cause a great deal of confusion and 23% said they had either intentionally or mistakenly fabricated political stories (Barthel et al., 2016). A critical component of the fake-news phenomenon is a digital media culture that fosters insular communities of like-minded citizens who perpetuate and reinforce information that supports their beliefs, regardless of its veracity (see Jenkins et al., 2013; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

But falling for fake news tells only a part of the story. One of the most profound ways in which media consumption has changed with the advent of Web 2.0 is the social sharing of information. As news consumers take a more active role in producing, critiquing, and sharing information (or misinformation), it complicates two of the critical components of media literacy: the ability to analyze and evaluate media messages (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993; Aufderheide, 1997). A once relatively straightforward information path from news organization to the audience has become a complex, multi-tiered one as individuals and even automated programs, or bots, share publishing access with traditional media content providers. In an analysis of news reports in the last three months of the 2016 presidential campaign, BuzzFeed News' Craig Silverman found Facebook engagement with the 20 top-performing fake political news stories

outperformed that of the top 20 top-performing real political news stories from major media outlets. The top 20 election stories from hoax sites and "hyperpartisan blogs" accumulated 8,711,000 Facebook interactions (shares, reactions, and comments) compared to 7,367,000 Facebook interactions with the top 20 election stories from news sites like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (Silverman, 2016). Not only does Silverman's research illustrate the importance of social networking sites – in particular Facebook – in the spread of media content, but it also emphasizes the impact individual users' interactions with social media can have on the collective intelligence of a group of people.

Utilizing a digital literacies framework that emphasizes literacy practices as socially situated ways of seeing, thinking, and doing (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008), this study aims to contribute to mass communication scholarly research by connecting gatekeeping and media literacy as interrelated practices that can inform media use. Implications of this research can benefit journalism practitioners and media organizations, media literacy and other educators, and individual media users.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The digital media environment can no longer be considered a novel and alternative setting for consuming content, but rather one that is integral to daily life. The advent of Web 2.0 fundamentally altered what was once a relatively straightforward path from message sender to message receiver into a complex one in which individuals and other entities share publishing access with traditional media content providers. As news consumers and technological elements like bots and platform algorithms drive more of what content receives the most attention within social networks through acts of content selection and sharing, questions of authenticity, credibility, and bias become increasingly important. Mass media have always been used as a vehicle to influence and persuade, but in traditional print and broadcast forms, persuasion techniques such as advertising and editorializing were comparatively easier to identify. Digital media, particularly social media, have blurred the lines; it has become possible for anyone to create a credible-looking website with little cost and effort, and tactics like native advertising – stories designed to look like editorial content but are actually paid advertisements – have become commonplace. And in the first years of the Trump presidency, when it seems as though a new story about the ways in which social networks are manipulated is published each day, the threat of misinformation to the collective intelligence of society grows more pronounced (e.g., Bessi & Ferrara, 2016; Boyd, 2017; Wardle, 2017).

Wardle (2017) notes that the term "fake news" – complete with air-quotes – has become a catchall phrase to account for a spectrum of mis- and disinformation that

thrives in the digital information ecosystem. As such, the term has become meaningless in its utilitarianism. Wardle's (2017) chart of the seven types of mis- and disinformation provides a comprehensive picture of what we are talking about when we talk about fake news, with content types like satire and clickbait headlines on the side of *misinformation* and manipulated and purely fabricated content intended to mislead people representing examples of *disinformation* (see Figure 1). For the purposes of this research, the term fake news is used generally to represent the gamut of content types included in Figure 1, with references to specific types of content when warranted.
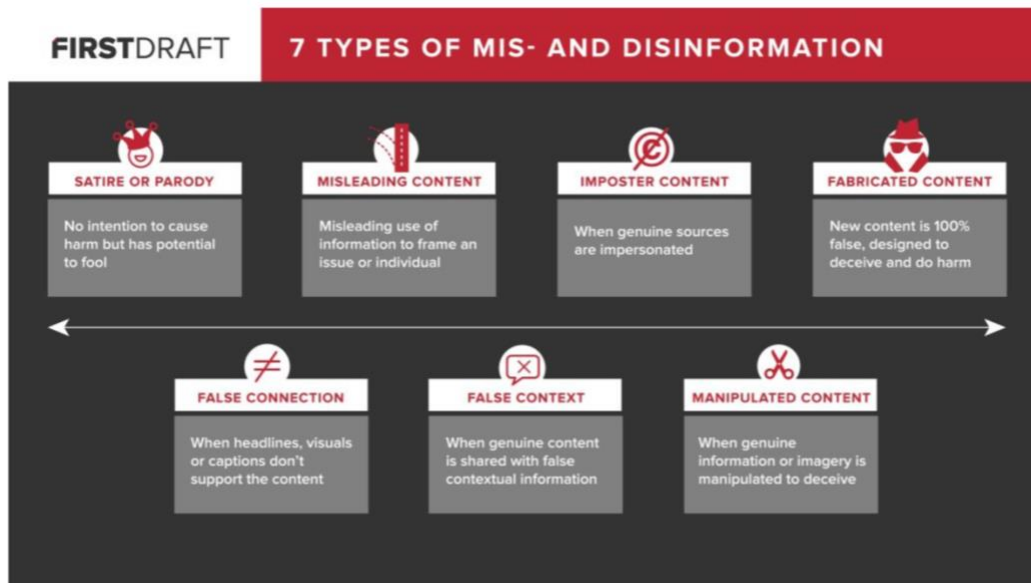
Figure 1. 7 Types of Mis- and Disinformation (Wardle, 2017).

One long-standing theory of mass communication research that is evolving within the social news environment is gatekeeping, which describes the process through which information flows in order to become news for public consumption. Scholars have offered updated alternatives to gatekeeping theory to reflect today's more complicated

multi-way communication landscape. Such modernized theories address the audience's increased role in creating, selecting, and sharing news, among other things (Bruns, 2005; Hermida, 2012b; Singer, 2014). Because the act of gatekeeping has traditionally been an implicit professional practice, most research has focused on the various factors influencing gatekeeping from the perspective of how it functions within a news-gathering organization. Though more scholars are examining media users' enhanced role in gatekeeping (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009; Singer, 2014), the bulk of that research focuses on *how* users play an expanded role in gatekeeping, with much less research focusing on *why* users practice gatekeeping or *what informs* their practice. Little research has examined the tie between gatekeeping practices and media literacy practices, but as more news consumers act as gatekeepers in their daily lives, the need to address the related literacies that accompany such practices is increasingly critical.

Gatekeeping Theory

  The origins of gatekeeping theory.

   Shoemaker and Vos (2009) describe gatekeeping as the process of "culling and crafting countless bits of information" into the limited messages shared with the public each day. Gatekeeping theory rose to academic prominence following David Manning White's (1950) seminal paper describing the news selection habits of one "Mr. Gates," a wire editor at a Midwestern newspaper. Following on the work of Kurt Lewin (1947), who described the food decision-making process as a series of gates, White analyzed the news items that Mr. Gates chose to include in the morning newspaper, what he left out, and why he chose not to run it. White visualized this process as a series of gates through

which information must pass to make it to publication and labeled journalists the gatekeepers of information by selecting items to be shared with their audiences. In doing so, he argued that journalists help to shape the social reality of the world around them. White found the gatekeeper in his study to be "highly subjective" and concluded that the wire editor's choices supported suppositions that an individual's specific values, beliefs, background, and other demographic and sociocultural characteristics wielded the most significant influence on gatekeeping. Shoemaker and Vos (2009), however, describe four other levels of influence that impact gatekeeping decisions beyond the individual: the routines and practices of journalism; the organizational level, including media ownership; the social institutional level, which looks at government and interest group influence; and the social system level, which includes ideology and culture. The authors argue that the levels of influence are not necessarily hierarchical, nor are they always additive, but rather that their strength may ebb and flow in different situations (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Other subsequent research has found that structural factors like the number of news items available, time pressures and organizational routines make gatekeeping a more mechanical process than hitherto examined (Berkowitz, 1990; McManus, 1990; Shoemaker et al., 2001; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Regardless of the degree of influence any one level may have, an underlying premise of gatekeeping theory is that it is a socially mediated process. Throughout the gatekeeping process, gatekeepers impose a set of values and judgment upon pieces of information that ultimately shape the news the public receives (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

Gatekeeping is traditionally thought of as a one-way process. Shoemaker and Vos (2009) describe it as such:

> Events occur > Information about events is spread > Gatekeeper receives information (or experiences it firsthand), then makes a decision to go or pass on it > If it goes, it will potentially move through other gates within the organization (an editor, for instance) > finally, it is distributed through the mass media.

Once an item of information is communicated through the mass media it is considered news. Thus, in Shoemaker and Vos' (2009) model, journalists control the diffusion of information. Bruns (2008) proposed a similar, but simplified model of traditional gatekeeping in which there are three bottlenecks: Input (news gathering by journalists) > Output (closed editorial hierarchy) > Response (letters to the editor). In this model, Bruns argues the news industry was able to "direct the public gaze" toward the things it wanted emphasized (2008, p. 5).

In its original form, the audience had very little connection to the gatekeeping process except as the receiver of news. Though scholars did allow some room for audience feedback in the form of calls or letters to the editor, this did not impact their view of journalists' gatekeeping control (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Shoemaker and Vos updated the gatekeeping model in 2009 by adding a third channel – the audience channel – to include such activities as posting comments to news sites and sharing news via email and social media (p. 125). The authors argue that activity that takes place in the audience channel strikes a balance between newsworthiness and personal relevance and adds a new dimension to the gatekeeping process. Whereas journalists' gatekeeping decisions are

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largely driven by their professional practices and routines, factors that motivate users to share information may be based more on the information they find entertaining and potentially relevant to their social networks (Mitchell et al., 2013; Ma et al., 2014; Singer, 2014). In the context of a newsroom, Shoemaker and Vos (2009) describe the individual as one who exerts some authority but is mostly constricted by structural forces. As gatekeeping processes extend past – or even bypass – the newsroom, it is necessary to look at the structural forces shaping decisions of audience gatekeepers.

Evolving theories of gatekeeping in the 21st century.

Although traditional gatekeeping practices in which there is a unidirectional flow of information controlled by journalists have been replaced by more reciprocal practices conducted by journalists and their audience, gatekeeping theory largely continues to be rooted in the past with little discussion of how the gated – those receiving the information – affect the gatekeeping process (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). However, the emergence of the audience as an integral factor in the gatekeeping process has given way to updated theories that address a social Web environment. Bruns (2006) describes the situation as one in which the gates have "multiplied beyond all control." In this environment, the audience is not a passive entity, but rather it is now engaged in a more participatory culture (Gillmor, 2004; Jenkins, 2006) in which they act as secondary gatekeepers (Singer, 2014). Gatekeeping in the digital era may align more closely with cultural and information theories, as opposed to traditional mass communication theories, as they explore gatekeepers' roles within broader social and community contexts (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009).

Research on digital gatekeeping practices has addressed the impact of converged newsrooms (Keith, 2011; Robinson, 2011), news organizations' use of social media and audience engagement techniques (Bruns, 2012; Lasorsa et al., 2010; Singer, 2014), and citizen journalism (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). The latter, which has been described as "random acts of journalism" (Lasica, 2003), is particularly prevalent in the research, likely because of low barriers for content creation and delivery tools and related issues of journalistic routines and professional identity (Allan, 2010; Lewis, 2012). Much of the research on citizen journalism focuses on "amateurs" who create content in a similar vein to original reportage but who are not trained journalists (Lowrey, 2006; Allan, 2010; Gil de Zuñiga et al., 2011), though research has shown that only a small percentage of people have created news content (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014). However, audience gatekeeping is not limited to citizens who are producing news. Singer (2014) argues that in sharing the news items they like most, audiences are performing an important secondary gatekeeping task that helps news organizations gain greater visibility for their work. Singer (2014) refers to the heightened role of the audience in selecting and sharing what is important to them as "user-generated visibility." User-generated visibility occurs when web users make "editorial judgments" about information that may be worthy of sharing (Singer, 2014, p. 56). Deuze (2008) argues that the social shareability of a particular news item may hold greater value than the inherent quality of the product itself. Pew Research Center (2010) found that social news users take pleasure in redistributing and commenting on existing news items, seeing it as a form of "cultural currency in their social networks" (n.p.). Likewise, Singer (2014) found that "active redistributors" of

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news see their role in disseminating information they believe their network will find relevant and interesting as an important part of their social presence (p. 58). Carpenter (2010) suggests that citizens may share information with the aim of benefiting a community (Hernandez-Serrano et al., 2017). In a sense, secondary gatekeepers are refining journalists' gatekeeping choices on a story-by-story basis. Kwon et al. (2012) concluded that audience gatekeeping practices on Twitter may diminish the control that professional media outlets have over distributing the news, instead sharing it with other alternative sources such as blogs and other "emergent, user-empowered channels" that users find more interesting (p. 224).

In reimagining Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchy of influences in a web environment, Keith (2011) argues that in this period of great change in which routines and norms have yet to be re-established, the individual may actually have more influence. In considering user-generated content, Keith notes that citizen producers are likely to be subject to ideological-level and extramedia influences but are not subject to media routines except in the context of existing routines for using social media. However, most individual producers are not subject to organizational constraints and, thus, may remove it from the hierarchy.

Gatewatching and ambient journalism.

Bruns (2008) argues that traditional notions of gatekeeping no longer apply. He instead offers up the alternative theory of gatewatching as:

a form of reporting and commenting on the news which does not operate from a position of authority inherent in brand and imprint, in ownership and control of

the newsflow, but works by harnessing the collective intelligence and knowledge

of dedicated communities to filter the newsflow and to highlight and debate

salient topics of importance to the community (Bruns, 2008, p. 5).

Gatewatching involves observing the many gates through which endless

information passes and highlighting information that is of most relevance to one's own

personal interests or to the interests of one's wider community (Bruns, 2005). In this

environment, agency shifts from journalists to anyone interested in the process, from

bloggers to eyewitness citizens (Bruns, 2008). In particular, the sharing of information

over social networks emphasizes the publicizing of events as opposed to the publishing of

a news report, thus it is not typically a finished product, but rather often serves as a

starting point from which information can be critiqued (Bruns, 2008). Like Shoemaker

and Vos' (2009) updated gatekeeping model, Bruns' (2005) gatewatching model

accounts for increased audience participation:

> gatewatching (watching open news sources) > Input (submission/selection of
>
> gatewatched items) > Output (publishing of stories to their networks) > Response
>
> (discussion and commentary, in an open loop) (p. 12).
>
> Bruns argues that this model describes news as a "co-developed piece of
>
> produsage" (2008, page 21).

Older, "traditional" media forms have become social as they are "shared,

commented upon, and reappropriated by users" (Bruns, 2014, p. 24). Thanks to the

ubiquity of mobile devices and publishing platforms, traditional gatekeepers share

authority over what news is disseminated, as well as how it is filtered, shared, distributed,

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and interpreted (Hermida, 2010b). Information is often distributed in "digital fragments" through social networks (Hermida, 2010b), and though some individual comments may gain greater visibility, it is typically difficult for individuals to "establish themselves as distinct from the rest of the social network" (Bruns, 2011, p. 130).

Another update to traditional gatekeeping theory is the concept of ambient journalism. Hermida (2010a) describes ambient journalism as an "awareness system that offers diverse means to collect, communicate, share and display news and information, serving diverse purposes" (p. 301). It is an always-on system that works on different levels of engagement, and it has implications in terms of how individuals "assign meaning to information from others, how they selectively attend to this information and how intentions are assigned to the information" (Markopoulous et al., 2009).

In social, participatory journalism, the content of the message is not the only information that is presented; as people share news in these contexts, their "social graph"—their profile, social connections, and past social network activity, for instance—offer an additional layer of information and context that must be considered alongside the content itself (Hermida, 2010b). Because of a high signal to noise ratio in awareness systems like Twitter and other social networks, assistance is required to aid in the selection and interpretation of messages, a role that traditionally went to professional journalists. And while journalists still do play this role today, they are hamstrung in their reach, thus requiring individuals to shoulder more of the responsibility than ever before (Hermida, 2010b). Users are able to demonstrate their interest in a story by liking it or commenting on it on a news website or social media site, and can extend the life of a

news item through other secondary gatekeeping activities like sharing it through email and their social networks.

Barzilai-Nahon's (2008) theoretical framework of networked gatekeeping further explores constructs of control and power, as well as the increasing collaborative and concurrent nature of information production and gatekeeping practices between gatekeepers and the gated. The updated framework acknowledges the diffusion of information afforded by information and communication technologies (ICTs) and seeks to explore environmental conditions that affect gatekeeping practices conducted by gatekeepers and the gated (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009). Labeling the groups acted upon by gatekeeping practices as "the gated" emphasizes the control aspects of gatekeeping and "[highlights] the gated as visible actors and the environment as encompassing multiple stakeholders. It is an environment with different actors, different roles, and a context that changes constantly" (Barzilai-Nahon, 2009, p. 10-61). For instance, search engines like Google have taken on a sizeable role in the gatekeeping process, as they are often the first step in the information-seeking process and results are filtered through proprietary, private algorithms designed to anticipate the types of results a particular user would most want to see (Hargittai, 2000).

Barzilai-Nahon (2008) defines the process of gatekeeping in a networked environment as including such activities as selection, addition, shaping, manipulation, and deletion of information. Further, networked gatekeeping theory elevates the importance of the gated "as a crucial component when analyzing gatekeeping" (Barzilai-

Nahon, 2008, p. 1496). Hermida et al. (2012) call for further research into how networked publics shape and reframe news.

Personal Media Use in a Digital Age

The evolution of media usage habits is driven by innovation of the distribution channels. As technology has made easier the process of producing, storing, and distributing information, the amount of information people consume has increased many times over. Hilbert and Lopez (2011) estimate the average person consumes approximately 174 newspapers' worth of information every day, up from about 40 newspapers in 1986. The amount of content available has continued to skyrocket even since Hilbert and Lopez documented it in 2011; the amount of information available, and the number of sources from which to find it – including television, radio, print, digital, mobile, and social media outlets – influences people's usage patterns. People interact with a variety of information streams continuously throughout the day and make decisions related to selecting, aggregating, distilling, and, ultimately, consuming media (Beam, 2011). Tewksbury (2003) found that people are more selective in the information they select in an online environment than they are in offline environments because of the control they have to access multiple sources.

Digital technologies have lowered barriers to consuming and producing media, while increasing opportunities for interacting and sharing information with others (Beam, 2011). Pew Research (2017) reports "seven-in-ten Americans use social media to connect with one another, engage with news content, share information and entertain themselves" (n.p.).

Social news sharing.

The Internet has given way to a wide variety of options for obtaining news. Though "social media" has been used as an umbrella term to describe the activities, platforms, and tools of today's news user, the term reflects the importance of connectivity and participation in the Web 2.0 environment (Hermida, 2012). Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social media sites as web-based services where people can create their own profiles, connect with others, and share information. With social networking sites (SNS), "sharing" has become the "constitutive activity" (John, 2012, p. 178), used to describe such activities as uploading photos, updating statuses, commenting on others' posts, sharing news items, and, generally, keeping in touch with others within the SNS. Hayes et al. (2016) refer to these "lightweight acts of communication" as *paralinguistic digital affordances* (p. 172). Hyperlinking to external information in a social media post or sharing a hyperlink previously posted by another entity is considered a form of audience gatekeeping and can influence those in one's social sphere (Kwon et al., 2012; Dimitrova et al., 2003).

Holt et al. (2013) found that social media use is related to an increased interest in news; however, Purcell et al. (2010) found Americans are no longer tied to a particular news outlet or even format, but rather that the consumption of news is based on opportunism. In 2010, Purcell et al. described the state of news as "portable (33% of cell phone users have news on their cell phones), personalized (28% customize their home pages), and participatory (37% have contributed to the creation of news)" (p. 2). By 2014, half of SNS users had shared news, images, or videos, or had discussed a news issue on

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social media. Fourteen percent of social media users had posted their own photos of a news event to social media and 12% had posted videos (Anderson & Caumont, 2014).

Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink (2014) challenged survey-based methodologies by arguing that such measures do not accurately portray people's actual news consumption. The authors note that previous research utilizing newsroom ethnography to define news production ultimately limits news consumption habits to viewing, listening, or reading (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2014). Instead, the authors used qualitative methods to determine users' understanding of their news usage practices to "discover discursive patterns used by speakers to interpret their daily life and to describe their decisions and behavior" (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2014, p. 3).

The authors identified 16 practices of news, including such acts as reading, checking, snacking, linking, and sharing (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2014). The authors found that mobile phones and news apps have lowered the threshold for news consumption, but that did not necessarily encourage a mass movement toward contributing to the news (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2014). Rather, news consumption habits seem to be more dependent on time and place needs; instead of a distinct activity, people have assimilated it into their everyday, anytime routine in a "checking cycle" (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2014). This also indicates a broadening of the definition of news to include information created by journalists, as well as anything else that is new, including Facebook updates, opinions on Twitter, and other personal information shared on social media (Costera Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2014).

Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer (2017) subsequently explored media users' reasons for choosing to click or not click on news items and found that the action of clicking is not necessary for many of the digital news user practices the researchers previously identified, as much of the information one needs can be viewed without a click.

Hermida et al. (2012) note that people are more frequently turning to their social circle to be their news editor; social networks help bring visibility to certain information, and information is often shared or recommended based on the perceived interests of the network. Anderson (2011) argues the "agenda of the audience" is fueled by audience members' desire to personalize news and to publicly register their interests. Hermida (2016) suggests that an appropriate slogan for today's social media environment could be "all the news that's fit to share," because social acts like clicking and disseminating are so prevalent (p. 90). Social news use is not limited to simply seeking information; it is also an opportunity for people to connect with one another and share experiences (Hermida, 2016). Jenkins et al. (2013) describe an information sharing ecosystem in which "citizens count on each other to pass along compelling news, information, and entertainment, often many times over the course of a given day" (p. 13).

Researchers have found that news users are most likely to prefer media content that is consistent with "attitudinal-congruent interpretations of social issues, as such content reassures a consistent image of the self" (Hameleers, et al., 2017, p. 481; see also Stroud, 2011). The tendency to consume news that reflects one's own beliefs is exacerbated in a digital media environment in which users—aided by technology—can protect themselves in filter bubbles of content that reflects their beliefs and blocks

opposing viewpoints (Pariser, 2011). Social networking platforms make it easy for news users to seek out like-minded people and news sources, processes that aid in "motivated reasoning," or limiting oneself to agreeable information that can justify an existing position on a topic (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). Pentina and Tarafdar (2014) found that social media users with smaller networks comprised mostly of friends and family were more likely to experience a news "information bubble," whereas those with larger networks of weaker ties were exposed to a broader array of news sources. Furthermore, those with stronger ties in their social networks experience information more heavily filtered through the attitudinal preferences of their networks (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014). Thus, social news users may assess the credibility of a source of information based on the reputation of the person sharing the information within their network, as opposed to the original information source. In this scenario, the amount of trust a social news user places in a particular news story may be beyond a journalist's or journalism organization's control (Lee et al., 2017).

Pew calls news today "a shared social experience as people exchange links and recommendations as a form of cultural currency in their social networks" (Purcell et al., 2010). Looking at most-viewed stories, Schaudt and Carpenter (2009) found that readers preferred stories based on the news values of proximity and conflict. In a survey of Facebook news users, Mitchell et al. (2013) found that people are most likely to click on a news link because the information is entertaining or relevant, though 37% said they clicked a link because a friend recommended it. In contrast, only 20% of Facebook news users clicked a link based on the news organization that sent it. The theory of social

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identity examines how individuals interact within a group and how their sense of belonging within a particular group can affect their membership in that group (Lampe et al., 2010). Individuals who share news information on social media sites are acting as opinion leaders by making previously available information personally relevant to their own network (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015).

Today's news users have a sense of feeling "bought-in" because in addition to consuming, they share, comment, and rework information as it relates to professional, social or civic needs (Robinson, 2011, p. 174). Oeldorf-Hirsch and Sundar (2015) found that when Facebook users share a news story, they are more likely to stay involved in the story one week after they posted it. Further, receiving valuable comments on an item shared on Facebook was found to be "psychologically powerful" (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015, p. 247). Robinson (2011) argues this may mean that people are learning to distinguish for themselves relevant, credible information; however, Ma et al. (2014) found that there is not a significant relationship between news consumers' perception of news credibility and their intention to share it. The authors suggest this may be because ascertaining credibility presents a challenge for consumers who lack editorial and gatekeeping skills; therefore, they have lower expectations for the credibility of online news (Ma et al., 2014). Metzger (2007) found that people reported spending very little time verifying information they encounter online, opting mostly for verification strategies that take the least time and effort.

Without sufficient time or desire to ascertain the credibility of every news item, social media users may share false information—unwittingly or purposefully. Research

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has shown social media can reinforce false pre-existing beliefs by creating echo chambers of like-minded people who perpetuate certain narratives. Controversial topics are particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation because they trigger emotional responses and are thus less likely to be critically analyzed. For instance, Betsch et al. (2010) found that new parents' exposure to anti-vaccine messages on social media may increase worry over vaccination and lessen their intention to vaccinate their children. However, Glanz et al. (2017) concluded that "interactive, informational interventions administered outside of the physician's office" through websites of accurate information coupled with interactive technologies through which parents can communicate with health professionals and other parents can improve vaccine acceptance (p. 5).

As the social aspects of news use continue to grow, it not only leads to the proliferation of gates (Bruns, 2005), but also to the diffusion of gatekeeping responsibilities. Hermida (2012) argues that journalism is a literacy practice informed by the discourses of professional practice. As an integral part of the journalistic process, this framework can extend to the act of gatekeeping itself. Kwon et al. (2012) found that audience gatekeepers use Twitter to not only share information but also to shape it in their own way by adding an additional layer of commentary. When journalists act as gatekeepers, they rely on their training to make informed decisions. In contrast, when news users are the gatekeepers, they are drawing on a diverse and disparate range of context, knowledge and experiences; professional standards do not exist. As more news users take on the role of secondary gatekeeper, through activities ranging from sharing a link to a news item via social media to creating content, they contribute to the collective

public knowledge on the most important and interesting current events. Thus, in order to better understand the gatekeeping standards of a social news ecosystem, it is necessary to consider the literacy practices that are informing individual news users' gatekeeping decisions.

"Fake news."

Fake news has been a challenge for media organizations since the means of mass distribution were created. A 1925 *Harper's* magazine piece entitled "Fake news and the public" describes the potential dangers of misinformation making its way into mass communication distribution channels:

> Once the news faker obtains access to the press wires all the honest
> editors alive will not be able to repair the mischief he can do. An editor
> receiving a news item over the wire has no opportunity to test its
> authenticity as he would in the case of a local report. The offices of the
> members of The Associated Press in this country are connected with
> one another, and its centers of news gathering and distribution by a
> system of telegraph wires that in a single circuit would extend five
> times around the globe. This constitutes a very sensitive organism. Put
> your finger on it in New York, and it vibrates in San Francisco.

Though fake news is hardly a new phenomenon, digital media has become something of a petri dish in which misinformation can multiply and spread at lightning speeds. Internet and media literacy researchers have long been concerned about the propensity for people to seek out information that conforms with their pre-existing beliefs

to form online echo chambers and "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011). When coupled with the ease with which people can share information and the amplifying effect of social networks like Facebook, there is great potential for spreading news that has not been properly fact-checked (Jun et al., 2017). But the 2016 U.S. presidential election brought an unprecedented magnitude of misinformation into the collective consciousness of the country, along with a popular catchphrase: "fake news." The term fake news has come to encompass a number of different types of information, from simple reporting errors to completely fabricated stories designed to sow confusion or cause harm to a term often used to criticize the media (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). Since 2016, many researchers have begun to examine that which falls on the disinformation end of Wardle's (2017) spectrum. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define fake news as false stories that are "distorted signals uncorrelated with truth" (p. 212). The authors also suggest fake news is popular because it is inexpensive to create, more costly to fact-check, and because of news consumers' penchant for partisan news (Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017).

Silverman (2016) includes a financial implication to the term, defining it as "completely false information that was created for financial gain." What was once more of a hard line within media organizations between content creation and advertising and profit-generation has become increasingly blurred in the digital age (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

The concern over the spread of fake news has risen to a fever pitch in the wake of the 2016 election because it underscores how many of the most utilitarian and democratic features of the Web can be employed to misinform and manipulate people, namely, the

low barrier to access and the ease of creating content that appears professional and engaging. SNS, in particular, are breeding grounds for easy dissemination of fake news. Declining trust for the mass media can be considered both "a cause and a consequence" for the increase of fake news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 215). In a study of fake news sites between 2014 and 2016, Vargo et al. (2017) found that fake news generation is increasing and that fake news sites did have the ability to set the mainstream media agenda on the issues of international relations, the economy, and religion during that time period. Further, the researchers found an association between fake news and partisan media, in that fake news sites appear to use content from partisan media as the basis for their fake stories. Likewise, partisan media outlets were found to be susceptible to fake news in 2016 (Vargo et al., 2017). And though many studies related to fake news frame are framed in the context of political polarization, the propensity to believe news that aligns to deeply held beliefs is not isolated to partisan news. Inherent human cognitive biases like confirmation bias, the tendency to believe information people want to hear, impair people's ability to decipher between real and fake news (Shu et al., 2017).

A survey conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs found that American adults are fooled by fake headlines about 75% of the time (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). The study also found that people surveyed who cited Facebook as a "major" source of news were more susceptible to fake news headlines (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). In an analysis of news stories about the 2016 presidential election, Silverman (2016) found that traditional mass media outlets dominated the news on Facebook until the final three months before the election. From there, Facebook users' engagement with stories from

fake news outlets greatly outpaced the traditional media. A survey of U.S. adults following the election found that 64% believe fake news causes confusion over basic facts in current events (Barthel et al., 2016), though most feel at least fairly confident in their own ability to detect fake news. With so much attention being paid to the online spread of fake news following the 2016 election, several companies including Facebook and Google announced that they would be taking steps to help fight fake news, such as partnering with fact-checking organizations and allowing users to flag information that may be false (Jun et al., 2017).

Lazer et al. (2017) identified several ways in which fake news spreads, including engagement features in SNS that make them susceptible to manipulation, social media users' limited attention span and the information overload that individuals deal with on a daily basis, and the influence of bots that "exploit the vulnerabilities that stem from our cognitive and social biases" (p. 7). The authors also suggest that misinformation and attacks on the mainstream media are "predominantly a pathology of the right" (p. 8). Silverman (2016) found that 17 of the 20 top-performing false 2016 election stories were pro-Donald Trump or anti-Hillary Clinton. And while Silverman (2017) notes that though his research on misinformation equally focused on left- and right-leaning news, the term "fake news" became politicized when Donald Trump began using it to describe news that he did not like, thus pressing his supporters to discredit information that cast him in an unfavorable light.

Scholars have found that online news viewing is related to online news sharing and increased factual knowledge—the ability to correctly identify pieces of

information—but not necessarily to structural knowledge, or the ability to connect concepts together (Beam et al., 2015; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Weeks & Holbert, 2013). For example, Beam et al. (2015) suggest that factual knowledge increases as news users intake information, whereas structural knowledge is enhanced when news users intentionally select news to share with others. Others argue that exposure to news information can make people feel more informed, without an actual gain in knowledge (Müller et al., 2016). However, as fake news proliferates across social networks, studies have shown that young people and adults alike have difficulty distinguishing between real and fake news (Wineburg et al., 2016; Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). Friggari et al. (2014) suggest that ICTs are typically neutral in that they can facilitate the spread of truthful and untruthful information. Jun et al. (2017) found that social media users are less likely to fact-check information when they are in a group setting, including a SNS like Facebook in which they perceive to be connected to others. What can result, then, is a "distributed credibility" in which like-minded people are collectively assessing the veracity of a source of information, one share at a time (Hernandez-Serrano et al., 2017). Sloman and Fernbach (2017) found that decision-making processes do not typically stem from individual reasoning, but rather from shared group-level narratives. Similarly, individuals tend to trust their social networks as sources of information because they are composed of personal sources (Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2012). It is not surprising, then, that social pressure does affect how people accept information (Lazer et al., 2017).

Zollo et al. (2015) found that among SNS users who frequent conspiracy-like or scientific pages, very few interact with information to debunk information shared within

their own echo chamber, and if they do, it is likely to result in increased interest in conspiracy-like content and a further entrenchment in tightly held beliefs. Brady et al. (2017) explored how "social contagion," that is, the phenomenon of how moral judgments spread throughout social networks, is diffused and intensified by online social networks. The researchers found that when Twitter messages related to three polarizing political topics included moral-emotional words their transmission increased by 20% per word (Brady et al., 2017). However, such messages are more likely to spread farther within like-minded groups, not necessarily beyond to out-of-group networks, underscoring the possibility for echo chambers to exist that intensify beliefs held within homogenous groups and increase polarization between different ideologies (Brady et al., 2017). Other research affirms how the polarizing effect of social media sites can foster the spread of disinformation because users' individual environments are often one-sided and without conflicting information to counter such falsehoods (Benkler et al., 2017). This can be particularly dangerous when it comes to enabling discriminatory and inflammatory ideas (Lazer et al., 2017).

For all the attention that fake news received since 2016 it is not the only issue creating confusion and impacting the quality of information being shared on SNS. The 24-hour news cycle that was born of cable television has erupted into a 1,440-minute breaking-news cycle fed by Twitter and its ilk (Gillmor, 2010). Even information originating from trusted, venerable journalism organizations like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* can be incorrect in the rush to get news out as it happens. In a study of rumors posted to Twitter related to breaking news events, Zubiaga et al. (2016)

found that unverified rumors create a "distinctive burst" in retweets within the first few minutes of an original post (p. 26). The authors also found that false rumors took significantly longer to be resolved than true rumors, and that discussion denying rumors took place even after the rumor was debunked or found to be true (Zubiaga et al., 2016). Similarly, Nyhan and Reifler (2015) note that false information can persist and influence one's judgment even after being presented with information to the contrary, a phenomenon known as belief perseverance.

The use of pundits and opinion in much of the political discourse taking place on cable television news and partisan websites can result in people mistakenly taking such information as fact (Rubin et al., 2015). Rubin et al. (2015) identify several types of deceptive news that can lead to news consumers' confusion in ascertaining credible information, including serious fabrications on the part of the media; large-scale hoaxes, or efforts to fool audiences by making a story appear to be news; and humorous fakes such as news satire. And when the act of spreading information is shared between journalism organizations and news consumers, the line between accurate and information blurs even more. Kovach & Rosenstiel (2010) note that critics of a combined news-sharing ecosystem "see a world without editors, of unfettered spin, where the loudest or most agreeable voice wins and where truth is the first casualty" (p. 7). For instance, when news is shared through SNS, it is often decontextualized, separated from its original headline, author, or source, and imbued with a user's opinion such that it has greater potential to mislead. And because the majority of news links on Facebook come from friends and family rather than news organizations (Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2012), the

definition of "trusted source" in a social media environment can take on multiple meanings.

Müller et al. (2016) suggest that, depending on Facebook users' need for cognition, the presence of news content in one's news feed can lead to intentional or unintentional knowledge acquisition. However, the researchers found that the mere presence of news in one's Facebook news feed can lead to a misplaced feeling of being well-informed, which may result in a decreased desire to seek information from other sources (Müller et al., 2016). A Pew Research survey found 23% of Americans say they have shared fake news; 14% of those respondents shared a story they knew to be false and 16% shared a story they later found to be fake (Barthel et al., 2016). When asked about who should bear a large responsibility in stopping the spread of fake news, 45% of U.S. adults said it was the responsibility of politicians and elected officials, 43% said the public is responsible, and 42% said it was the responsibility of SNS and search engines (Barthel et al., 2016).

Considering the confusion that can be wrought when interacting with news information online, especially through SNS, there is a demonstrated critical need for individuals to possess a set of tools to successfully access and assess information, practices that come from information and media literacy education. For example, Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) suggest several opportunities for literacy programs to factor into the fight against what they refer to as "information disorder."

Defining Media Literacy

Though the study of media literacy has been fraught with definitional confusion, a well-cited and broad classification of media literacy is the ability to understand, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1997). Drilling down a bit deeper, several researchers take a more critical approach to literacy. For example, Adams and Hamm define media literacy as "the ability to create personal meaning from the visual and verbal symbols we take in every day from television, advertising, film, and digital media. It is more than inviting students to simply decode information. They must be critical thinkers who can understand and produce in the media culture swirling around them" (as cited in Potter, 2010, p. 676). Sholle and Denski believe that media literacy "should be conceptualized within a critical pedagogy and thus 'it must be conceived as a political, social, and cultural practice'" (as cited in Potter, 2010, p. 676). Potter (2010), like many mass media scholars, frames media literacy in terms of the potential effects the mass media can have on its audience. Potter (2010) finds four common themes among media literacy research: the mass media have the potential to exert negative effects; the purpose of media literacy is to help people protect themselves from these effects; media literacy must be developed by the individual; and media literacy is multi-dimensional, affecting individuals at a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral level, as well as through other people, institutions, and culture (p. 681). Even within this narrow framework, however, he acknowledges the disparate definitions that have come out of media literacy research that involve not only reading and writing, but also visual and multimedia analysis, and mass media production skills (Potter, 2010).

Many scholars take issue with the close association between media literacy and media effects because it does not acknowledge literacy as a social practice inseparable from its context, and it exists within an outdated framework of a passive audience who is awash in media messages without any agency to make informed choices about the media it consumes (Tyner, 1998; Gray, 2005; Hobbs, 2011). Hobbs describes this as an empowerment-protection debate, particularly as it relates to media literacy education for children (2011). Further weaknesses of a media effects model are the fact that experimental methodologies typically only describe short-term effects, and those types of studies assume that culture and individual experience are not intervening effects (Hobbs, 2011). Additionally, little research of this sort looks at how media are consumed, as well as what media are consumed outside of experimental situations. Instead, in this line of research, literacy education serves the purpose of cognitive fulfillment, assuming that, like the media messages it tests, learning is directly embedded in the learner.

In a response to Potter's essay (2010) on the state of media literacy, Hobbs (2011) asserts that Potter has left out a great deal of work that falls outside of the mass media effects realm, particularly research done in the fields of communication, education, and public health. When viewed as an extension of the traditional concepts of literacy, Hobbs notes that media literacy research can explore theories of civic engagement, constructivist learning, rhetoric, information and communications technology, digital remix and informal education, civic engagement, and cultural hegemony (2011). She suggests that a restrictive view of media literacy as a means to protect people from media's harmful effects denies the prospect that media literacy is a key component in the development of

critical thinking and communication skills (Hobbs, 2011). In order to participate in today's society, one must consume and use media; thus, media literacy education should not be about protecting people from media, but rather it should be about engaging with it (Buckingham, 2003). Thus, a more inclusive view of media literacy education should focus on developing critical thinking skills and move "beyond criticism and toward broader understanding and action" (Mihailidis, 2009, p. 21).

Definitional, conceptual, and theoretical disparities in media literacy research exist because different fields approach the subject from various perspectives, typically without collaboration. In synthesizing recent research in media literacy education, Martens (2010) found that despite the existing fragmented body of empirical research, different conceptual perspectives can complement one another to provide a more comprehensive understanding of media literacy practices. Interdisciplinary approaches that situate media literacy in a broader category of new or digital literacies can help provide richer analysis of the contexts in which media messages are created, disseminated, received, and used. Within a digital literacies framework, for instance, media literacy is viewed as an ongoing sociocultural practice that is mediated by the affordances of digital technologies. Daer (2010) describes literacy practices with and around new media as "wonderful instantiations of the most contemporary knowledge about how students learn and participate with media communities in their context of use" (p. 193).

Media literacy within literacy studies.

In recent decades, a rich body of literacy research from intersecting and overlapping fields has sought to reshape what it means to be literate in a world increasingly mediated by communication technology. Rather than adopting a functional view in which literacy is a cognitive skill located within an individual mind that one either possesses or does not possess, the new literacy studies (NLS) model is more broadly conceived as communicating via multiple modes and media. The NLS favors a sociocultural model in which literacy is a socially situated practice that is impacted on a local level by the specific cultural contexts of a given situation (Street, 1988; Jenkins et al., 2006).

Prior to the work of Street and others in the late 20th century, the cultural study of literacy was dominated by an autonomous model, which supported the idea that literacy itself has the power to bring about higher intelligence and social and economic change, and, for this reason, literate cultures were intellectually superior to those without alphabetic literacy. Goody and Watt (1968), Ong (1982), and others asserted that literacy is independent of any mediating factors, such as specific social or cultural characteristics. This view of literacy became known as the Great Divide, which Olson (1988) illustrated when he wrote that "[s]peech makes us human and literacy makes us civilized" (p. 175). Ong notes that writing has "transformed human consciousness" (1982). In the autonomous model, increased literacy leads to increased cognition, which, in turn, leads to advanced societies. It does not take into consideration existing social, cultural, economic factors of the people who are acquiring the literacy.

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In contrast, in the NLS' "ideological" model, literacy is not focused on a set of skills, but rather literacy is a social practice in which context affects literacy. Because literacy is a social practice, everyone starts from a different place, given his or her social background and practices. As a lifelong process, people acquire a variety of literacy practices to navigate different social contexts (Gee, 2007). This comes to bear in a digital environment since there is a wide variety of social constructs occurring, sometimes simultaneously. Literacy is not a neutral skill, and it is not merely a technical skill, although that will come into play in the acquisition of literacy (Street, 2003). This can make it difficult to ethnographically study literacy across contexts. However, concepts such as literacy events (Heath, 1982), which are discrete situations in which people engage with reading and writing, and literacy practices (Street, 1998), which explain the larger systems in which literacy takes place in a community, have been employed to help look for patterns within specific social contexts that can be linked to a broader understanding of literacy as a social practice. In a digital environment in particular, Brandt and Clinton (2002) argue that the power of literacy as a technology can "insinuate itself into social relations anywhere" (p. 354).

The burgeoning digital age and its wide-sweeping ramifications for literacy and learning no doubt influenced late 20th-century shifts in literacy studies. New literacy studies has become something much more than just a contrast to an older, outdated autonomous model in the context of the profound changes brought about by ICTs. Mills (2010) describes this as the "Digital Turn." Indeed, the Internet and other ICTs have spurred research across a variety of disciplines under the auspices of an increasingly

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confusing patchwork of terms, ranging from new literacies, to digital literacies, multiliteracies, computer literacy, information literacy, and media literacy, among others.

Lankshear and Knobel (2006) define literacies as "socially recognized ways of generating, communicating, and negotiating meaningful content as members of Discourses through the medium of encoded texts" (p. 64). Gee (1999) made a distinction between "little d" discourse and "big D" Discourse:

> When "little d" discourse (language-in-use) is melded integrally with nonlanguage "stuff" to enact specific identities and activities, then I say that "big D" Discourses are involved . . . ways of acting, interacting, feeling, believing, valuing, together with other people and with various sorts of characteristic objects, symbols, tools, and technologies ... In turn, you produce, reproduce, sustain, and transform a given "form of life" or Discourse (p. 7).

In the digital ecosystem, encoded texts are hybrid communication forms, integrating so-called analog tools of reading and writing with images, video, hyperlinks, etc., that require new understandings. And though communication on the Internet is predominately written -- it is itself a hybrid of written, oral and multimodal language, a sort of new embodiment of Ong's secondary orality (1982). Coiro et al. (2008) argue that the Internet's impact is the central question in literacy education research, and that the Internet is the defining technology for literacy. A lack of overarching theoretical and methodological frameworks has hindered researchers' ability to make inroads into sweeping paradigm shifts in literacy education, but Coiro et al. (2008) believe the diverse

and disparate perspectives brought to the discussion offer an advantage and important opportunity to channel efforts into a truly interdisciplinary approach to digital literacies.

The shift from the singular literacy to plural literacies represents a shift away from thinking of literacy as reading and writing and instead acknowledging literacies as a set of social practices. The term "literacies" acknowledges that reading and writing are not separate acts, but rather are integral to a wide variety of practices (Kalantzis and Cope, 2012). This shift epitomizes the process in which people interact with a digital environment. A singular view of literacy—which is tantamount to scholastic literacy—can no longer even begin to describe the practices and strategies people undertake as they navigate an online environment. Because literacy is always socially situated, people have developed different literacy practices to handle new technologies, the increasingly multimodal environments of ICTs, and the various Discourses created by different online environments such as passionate affinity spaces and online video games (Gee & Hayes, 2009). The traditional cognitive perspective of literacy as reading comprehension, especially that offline and online reading comprehension are isomorphic (Coiro & Dobler, 2007), cannot account for the dynamic environment that requires us to simultaneously evaluate text, images, multimedia content, 3D video games, and more.

Coiro et al. (2008) note that the space of new literacies is highly contested, stemming from the diverse theoretical and epistemological perspectives of its researchers. Despite the debate, the authors offer four defining characteristics of new literacies: new technologies require new literacy tasks (e.g., social practices, skills, strategies, etc.,) that take place within the new technologies; new literacies are central to full participation in

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the world community; new literacies are deictic and rapidly changing—the Web in particular has the ability to spontaneously beget newer technologies of literacy (think the Twitter hashtag); and new literacies are multiple, multimodal, and multifaceted (2008). Scholars across disciplines are pushing for new theoretical frameworks guided by the overarching characteristics of new literacies, arguing that existing non-digital frameworks for literacy cannot account for the social practices of the Internet and related technologies (Coiro et al., 2008; Jenkins, 2008, Hobbs & Jensen, 2009).

Bawden (2008) describes the continued evolution of the term digital literacy(ies), calling it a framework for integrating other literacies, such as information literacy and computer literacy, which imply more tool-based, information-seeking skills, to more critical literacies of evaluation, which is where media literacy typically sits. Bawden describes four components within this digital literacy framework, which help to delineate how different literacies work with one another to create a more holistic set of literacies. They are: underpinnings (the background knowledge and basic skills of computer and analog literacies); background knowledge (describing information-seeking and –retrieval competencies); central competencies (including the ability to read, understand, create, communicate, and evaluate); and attitudes and perspectives (which encompass moral/social literacy and independent learning). Bawden's framework, only one of many that aims to organize the multitude of concepts that make up new literacy studies, supports the notion that digital literacies can be realized in degrees; there is no on/off switch.

Martin (2008) takes a slightly different approach to digital literacies with a three-phase model. Phase 1 is the functional phase, which includes the skills and concepts required for "digital competence"; Phase 2 is socio-cultural, or effective digital usage in a variety of applications including personal, professional, and within certain interest groups; and Phase 3 is the digital transformation that enables innovation and creativity (p. 167). Digital transformation is fully embodied within the activities of professional communities of practice (Wenger, 2000) or informal passionate affinity spaces (Gee & Hayes, 2009).

A digital literacies framework is well suited for studying media literacy and media literacy education because it incorporates knowledge and skills and considers contextual factors like the "social, political, and economic environments" in which media are created (Ashley et al., 2013).

Media literacy as a digital literacy practice.

With some overarching principles of digital literacies firmly established, Coiro et al. (2008) argue that it is possible to push for greater depth, rigor, and sophistication in forging interdisciplinary connections. In the study of media literacy, an interdisciplinary approach can help to streamline the existing discrete lines of inquiry. Tyner (1998) has expressed frustration with traditional mass communication research approaches to studying media literacy, pointing out that they are commonly rooted in a tradition of decontextualized content analysis that favors the message over the medium and the receiver. Instead, Deuze (2011) suggests that media study must focus on the way people

use media in the context of people's sense of reality and move beyond the "production-content-reception" premise of media.

The paradigm shift from a one-to-many to a many-to-many mass media, coupled with a relentless real-time, 24-hour news cycle has had a profound effect on both analog and digital media. Audiences are increasingly fragmented and as a result, information is served up in ever-smaller bite-sized chunks in order to attract their attention (Rheingold, 2010). Media are becoming invisible in their ubiquity, such that people are not aware of its presence in their lives (Deuze, 2011). This has implications on the ways in which people consciously select certain media. Situating media *in,* instead of *with,* everyday life can draw attention to the "wider social context of finding, producing, editing, and distributing meaning through what Castells calls 'mass self-communication'" (Deuze, 2011, p. 139).

For many scholars, participation has a reflexive effect on media literacy, in that the more a person participates with media, the more he or she engages in media literacy practices (Jenkins, 2006; Gillmor, 2010; Rheingold, 2010). Rheingold (2010) cautions that so-called "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001) may have grown up with technology, but that does not mean they understand the "rhetorics of participation." Freire and Macedo (1987) call this the ability to "read the world." For generations born before the digital revolution, which Prensky (2001) refers to as "digital immigrants," the implications of technology-mediated communication on media literacy practices may be even more pronounced. Scholars suggest that traditional conventions for determining credibility may be less effective in an online environment (Metzger et al., 2010). Such traditional

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methods relied on higher barriers to access to information, thus resulting in a small number of experts who are given a high degree of credibility (Callister, 2000). In a digital environment, however, experts may have less authority and individuals may rely more on the collective intelligence of online groups to help them evaluate online sources (Metzger et al., 2010). Through focus group research, the authors found that people increasingly turn to social networking sites and other reputation systems to help them assess credibility through such acts as "social information pooling, personal opinion confirmation, enthusiast endorsements, and interpersonal resource sharing" (Metzger et al., 2010, p. 433).

Participation is particularly important in relation to news media content because of its focus on the role the news media play in democracy. Ashley et al. (2013) argue that in contrast to other types of media content, news is expected to "inform self-governing citizens" (p. 7). Jenkins (2013) describes participatory culture as one in which people can use media to "shape the processes of cultural production and circulation" (p. 112). He also notes that in a digital environment there are no overarching established ethical guidelines for creating and sharing content online, though specific online communities may set their own guidelines. Thus, in a digital landscape with egalitarian rules for creation and participation, traditional media gatekeepers are less effective in their ability to provide context and verification for information, putting the onus on individuals to make sense of it all (Tyner, 1998).

Media literacy education.

Because media literacy is typically conceived of as a set of competencies or skills, there is a close connection between media literacy and education (Kellner & Share, 2005). In the U.S. two major educational organizations, The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) and the Center for Media Literacy (CML), have developed their own visions for promoting media literacy. NAMLE developed a set of core principles for media literacy education, which address the critical thinking and inquiry skills needed to receive and create media messages, the importance of those skills in developing active participants in democratic society, and that media literacy is a situated and ongoing practice into which people bring their "individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages" (NAMLE, 2007). CML outlined five core concepts for media literacy based on the premise that all media messages are "constructed" from a set of institutionalized norms and rules, that people experience media messages differently, and that media are "organized to gain profit and/or power" (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 376). Whereas different organizations and scholars approach media literacy from a variety of theoretical and epistemological perspectives, general agreement exists in the literature as to the goals and proposed outcomes of media literacy education (Arke & Primack, 2009; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Martens, 2010; Scharrer, 2002).

The majority of media literacy education research focuses on K-12 education. Dennis suggests this is because media literacy is thought of as part of the socialization process (2004). Though the U.S. trails other countries like Canada, the U.K., and

Australia in its efforts (Kellner & Share, 2005), the tenets of media literacy—albeit not identified as such—are highlighted in the current national Common Core State Standards Initiative:

> To be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, report on, and create a high volume and extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new. The need to research and to consume and produce media is embedded into every element of today's curriculum (2010, n.p.)

Scholars note that the 21st-century push for technology in education often mistakes using digital tools as a pathway to obtaining digital literacies (Hobbs, 2011). Instead, Hobbs (2011) argues for an approach that emphasizes how digital tools can be used to foster critical thinking, creation, and collaboration skills. Similarly, Daer suggests an approach to media education that promotes a deeper understanding of media production and use (2010). Understanding how students use the Internet on their own time, as opposed to how educators ask them to engage with it during school, is of particular importance when developing curriculum, such that the focus shifts from "tool competence" toward "digital citizenship" (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009, p. 6). Kellner and Share (2005) believe a "student-centered, bottom-up approach" is vital to allowing students to evaluate media in the lens of their own culture, knowledge, and experiences (p. 370). Similarly, Gutiérrez and Hottmann (2006) suggest that media literacy education objectives should focus on increasing student enjoyment of media, discussing how media construct reality and produce meaning, and developing competencies for creating media.

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Such student-focused educational activities as keeping media diaries and analyzing one's own interpretation of media help students critically engage with media (Rosenbaum et al., 2008). Making connections between media use and other aspects of life, such as civic participation, help to emphasize media's social responsibility as well as how media use can have positive effects (Hernandez-Serrano, 2017; Mihailidis, 2009). Leavitt and Peacock (2014) contend that participation in discussion about such topics as politics and public affairs can be as important for people's understanding of news items as exposure to the news itself. Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) caution against approaches that position traditional media literacy practices such as critiquing media messages as a "panacea for the spread of misinformation" and instead advocate for the development of media literacy research and practices "directed at the critique and creation of media in support of a common good" that can address a social news sharing culture (p. 451).

Assessing educational outcomes is difficult, however, which has resulted in a gap in the research (Mihailidis, 2009). Hobbs & Jensen (2009) have argued for more support for the work of those who are developing and testing curriculum and instructional methods that connect students' mass media experience to developing deeper critical thinking skills. Quantitative measures such as experimental and nonexperimental group designs are central to research measuring the effects of educational interventions (Hobbs & Frost, 2003). Media literacy scholars have used quantitative measures to establish baseline levels of media literacy (Ashley et al., 2013), and to evaluate the effects of media literacy interventions in such areas as reading comprehension and writing skills (Hobbs & Frost, 2003), health communication (Primack et. al, 2006), and the media's

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portrayal of sex (Pinkleton et al., 2008) and violence (Scharrer, 2006). However, others

argue such assessments decontextualize the learning and cannot account for long-term

changes in media literacy practice outside of the classroom (Mihailidis, 2009).

Furthermore, quantitative studies that employ surveys rely on self-reported attitudes

(Livingstone et al., 2005). Livingstone (2004) argues that quantitative findings alone

cannot address the "textuality and technology that mediates communication" (p. 8). A

mixed-methods approach to analyzing educational outcomes that allows for both

inductive and deductive reasoning can result in a study of greater scope (Livingstone et

al., 2005; Mihailidis, 2009). Employing more than one method helps to compensate for

limitations of one method over another (Livingstone et al., 2005). Ethnographic research,

for instance, can explore students' actual media experiences and their perception of

media literacy strategies (Van Bauwel, 2008). From a digital literacies perspective, Jones

(2013) argues the research goal is not to determine if people are "learning" something,

"but rather to *find out* what they are *doing* as they engage in their everyday practices

[*emphasis original*]" (Jones, 2013, p. 844). Jones (2013) suggests the use of methods

such as participant observation and analysis of textual artifacts.

In a rare study of postsecondary students, Mihailidis (2009) used both quantitative

and qualitative methods to assess what students were taking away from media literacy

classroom experiences in terms of civic participation. In order to encourage transference

from classroom skills to real-world practices, Mihailidis (2009) found that media literacy

education should stress the development of good consumers and good citizens. Though

addressing an adult audience and not necessarily a classroom environment, Gillmor

(2010) also emphasizes the importance of critical media consumption in increasing civic engagement. Despite the fact that critical media consumption remains important throughout one's life, Dennis (2004) argues that media literacy education "for the most part ignores adults" (p. 205). Livingstone et al. (2005) also note that the effectiveness of media literacy has rarely been tested in relation to informal or lifelong learning. The need to address this hole in the research is heightened in a digital media environment, as successful navigation requires a "sophisticated ability" in terms of both technical and critical thinking skills (Dennis, 2004, p. 205). Though media industries and other social institutions have a vested interest in adult media literacy education, there have been few concerted efforts to address the adult audience (Dennis, 2004). An increase in informal learning opportunities brought about by the Internet, in particular the increasing popularity of MOOCs, has the potential to meet this need.

Situated Learning and Online Spaces

Situated literacy implies that learning is also a situated practice, embedded in the organizational, cultural, epistemological, or social values of a particular group (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gee, 2007). In a more traditional or cognitive approach to learning, the focus may be on the effect of some instructional input on some aspect of literacy within an individual, but in a social learning system, notions of competence and expertise are historically and socially defined (Wenger, 2000). Just as literacy is defined by what people think, say, and do in particular contexts, knowing is similarly assessed by socially defined competence (Daer, 2010). In the situated learning model, learning is best accomplished in the environment in which it is applied. Within Wenger's communities of

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practice, newcomers begin as apprentices or legitimate peripheral participants (LPPs), seeking to learn the values and practices of the enterprise. Through experience and engagement in the group, competency is achieved and the novice becomes the expert. The concept of communities of practice is similar to Gee's (2007) passionate affinity spaces, which are informal spaces constructed around a mutual passion. Learning occurs in much the same way, with newcomers typically taking a lesser role, but knowledge is distributed throughout the space on a fluid and ongoing basis. Passionate affinity spaces are not top-down learning environments, but rather redefine learning as a collaborative and collective process that harnesses the strengths of their members (Gee & Hayes, 2009).

Metzger et al. (2010) contend that the technological evolution of the Internet has made it and its users "vigorously social" (p. 414). Motivations for participating in online spaces are varied (Leavitt & Peacock, 2014). Scholars have found that online commenters are motivated by a desire to express opinions more so than a desire to engage in discussion, while comment readers are motivated by a desire to hear multiple perspectives on a topic (Leavitt & Peacock, 2014). Motivations for participating on social networks vary still. Research supports the social aspect of such sites for connecting with friends and fostering a sense of belonging as motivating factors for social media use (see Leavitt & Peacock, 2014; Lin & Lu, 2011; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2017) found that online social communication processes "of meaning making through communication" can play an important role in political persuasion (p. 183).

Social media participation lends itself to what Carey (2008) refers to as the ritual view of communication, which includes acts such as "'sharing,' 'participation,' 'association,' 'fellowship,' and 'possession of a common faith' (p. 15)." The aim of communication in this ritual view is not to transmit information, but rather to maintain society through the "representation of shared beliefs." Similarly, when news users have the ability to share and comment on information in a way that may solidify their standing within their personal networks, it emphasizes the dramatic focus of the news (Carey, 2008). Given that news use is becoming an increasingly social experience, social learning environments may be particularly conducive to engaging in media literacy practices (Jenkins et al., 2006; Stewart, 2013).

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, have been touted as a next wave in 21st-century learning because they offer an opportunity for global, online learning (Stephens & Jones, 2014). The term MOOC was first used by George Siemens and Stephen Downes to describe a free online course offered through the University of Manitoba (Stephens & Jones, 2014). MOOCs are designed as not-for-credit, web-based learning experiences that present information on a wide variety of topics to people interested in advancing their knowledge. People choose to participate in MOOCs for myriad reasons, from professional development to lifelong learning pursuits (Stephens & Jones, 2014). Most MOOC offerings are free, although some platforms may also charge fees to participants wishing to receive a completion certificate (Bartolome & Steffens, 2015). Research is mixed on the effectiveness of the MOOC model (Stephens & Jones,

2014; Bartolome & Steffens, 2015), with much attention being paid to low completion

rates that hover at or below the low teens (Jordan, 2013). However, there is much debate

among MOOC providers and instructors on how to define completion within a MOOC

(Stephens & Jones, 2014). For instance, because of the informal nature of MOOC

learning, participants often "set some of their own terms for participation" and move in

and out of MOOC courses once they have gained the information they were seeking

(Stephens & Jones, 2014). Not all MOOC learners are active completers, as described in

the MOOC literature; on the contrary, many may prefer a "buffet-style learning

experience" (Stephens & Jones, 2014, p. 347). However, Course Central reported the

number of students who signed up for at least one MOOC in 2015 to be 35 million (Shah,

2015), so the popularity of the MOOC as a learning platform is evident (Siemens,

2012b).

MOOCs generally fit into two categories: xMOOCs and cMOOCs (Stephens &

Jones, 2014). By emphasizing instructor lectures, xMOOCs take a form more akin to

traditional instructor-driven education (Stephens & Jones, 2014). On the other hand,

cMOOCs take a constructivist approach to learning by focusing on creating a community

of learners fostered by the open online environment (Siemens, 2012a; Stephens & Jones,

2014). In a cMOOC environment, social learning is facilitated by the use of distributed

tools such as discussion boards and social networks (Stephens & Jones, 2014; Chiappe-

Laverde et al., 2015). Koutropolous and Hogue (2012) note that participation is key to a

MOOC's success, recommending that participants tie course content to life experiences

as valuable reflections.

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Stewart (2013) argues that the MOOC model has the potential to foster digital literacies. The more functional aspects of digital literacies are brought to bear in the MOOC environment because of its reliance on a technological platform. The learning process requires "the ability to work with current digital tools to connect fragmented, diffuse, and distributed knowledge nodes, both human and artifactual, [and] is perhaps the most important literacy that the MOOC environment rewards" (McAuley et al., 2010, pp. 46–47). Stewart contends that though few MOOCs explicitly aim to enhance digital literacies that Lankshear and Knobel (2007) describe as more "participatory, collaborative, and distributed," because of their inherent openness, it may be an inadvertent goal. Courses set up in the cMOOC model, in particular, emphasize a participatory approach, which coincides with Jenkins et al.'s (2006) suggestion that media literacy skills are inherently social skills that emphasize such tasks as performance, simulation, appropriation, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, and transmedia navigation. The instructional design of the MediaLIT MOOC analyzed in this study emphasizes the participatory aspects of a cMOOC or informal affinity space. Though the course materials and lessons are teacher-centric, the bulk of the activities and learning takes place within the discussion portion of the course, both in discussion forums and student blogs. The course discussion environment promotes such participatory practices as interactivity, openness to feedback, and the sharing of resources (Jenkins et al., 2006). Though meaning making occurring within the MediaLIT MOOC is socially situated within the course (Knobel & Lankshear, 2015), evaluating themes within the literacy

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practices taking place can link to broader understanding of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1998).

Research Questions

Though the field of media literacy research is greatly contested, scholars agree that in order to successfully navigate the 21st-century media landscape, citizens must possess a collection of skills and competencies, from the functional and technical to the critical (Coiro et al., 2008; Hobbs, 2011). It cannot simply be assumed that Internet use leads to proficiency (Belshaw, 2014). Thus, media literacy plays an increasingly important role in today's "media-saturated knowledge society" (Livingstone et al., 2005, p. 52) in which messages are not only created by both professional producers and citizens, but are given extended or new life through participation in social networks (Singer, 2014). As people negotiate media in a variety of contexts, from the individual to the collaborative, they must practice a diverse set of literacies throughout this continuum (Gee & Hayes, 2011; Jenkins, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Pew Research Center's State of the News Media 2014 reports that the "vast majority" of Americans get news in some digital format. In 2016, Pew Research Center found that 62% of American adults get news from social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Among social media news users, those who use YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram are more likely to report getting news mostly by chance, while Reddit, Twitter, and LinkedIn news users are as likely to seek it out as they are to find news by chance (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Further, 50% of social media users have engaged with the news in their social networks by sharing or reposting stories, images, or videos. When

"citizens of the knowledge society" curate information and add their own commentary, they categorize it for other people's memories (Levy, 2011). Thus, individual sharing and curating activities taking place within social networks and through other means of computer-mediated communication like email and online discussion boards contribute to what Levy (2005) calls "collective intelligence." To consider the strength of the collective, then, one must look to the media literacy practices of both the individual contributors and the collective itself.

Gatekeeping, as both a theory of mass communication and a journalistic practice, has likewise been impacted by the shift toward a more participatory media environment. Scholars have described the evolution of gatekeeping from a limited set of gates through which media organizations controlled the flow of information to an environment with an unlimited number of gates and gatewatchers who monitor a constant stream of media messages and select and share the information that is most relevant to them and to their social networks (Bruns, 2006). Singer (2014) describes the redistribution tasks of gatekeeping as "deliberate action[s] based on explicit content assessment" (p. 57). Research has documented how changes in the gatekeeping process have affected newsrooms and journalistic practices (Lewis et al., 2013; Robinson, 2011; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). It has also described how media users are themselves becoming gatekeepers as they share information with their social networks, as well as what types of information they share most often (Bruns, 2012; Hermida, 2010a; Hermida 2010b; Lewis et al., 2013). Scholars have suggested further research into the criteria media users apply in selecting news to "make more visible" in their social networks, and whether these criteria

are similar to journalistic norms (Singer, 2014, p. 69; see also Ma et al., 2014); however, little research has been conducted related to the personal agency and responsibility involved in audience gatekeeping decisions. This research aims to help fill the gap by connecting gatekeeping theory and practice to a sociocultural framework of digital media literacy. The foundation for making this connection is the argument that journalism practices are a set of literacies informed by the norms set by print journalism (Hermida, 2012). By applying the general framework to specific journalistic practices, gatekeeping can also be studied as a literacy practice, or a "socially recognized ways of generating, communicating, and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008).

Using the MediaLIT MOOC as the data source enabled the researcher to address two underdeveloped areas in the research. First, the MOOC platform itself is new to both gatekeeping and media literacy research. Very little gatekeeping research is done outside of the context of media organizations. What research does exist has focused on how gatekeeping is conducted on various social networking sites. Though the MOOC can be considered the gatekeeping platform in this study, it can also be argued that the gatekeeping conducted by students is not platform-specific, as students share information they initially discovered on a variety of other digital platforms. Whereas social networking sites typically push out news media content that is then consumed and possibly shared by users, the MOOC is a space for sharing information discovered elsewhere and then brought into the space to discuss.

Although the MOOC enables sharing from multiple sources and mediums, technological limitations of the course space existed that may have affected what content was shared and subsequently viewed by others. Students shared media content through the hyperlink feature within edX discussion forums. The hyperlink made it easy for other students to go to the original home of the content; however, it did require an extra step, which students were likely only to take if they were interested in the topic. Unlike on SNS like Facebook and Twitter, which have the ability to embed a thumbnail picture and teaser when posting a link, students had to base their consumption decisions solely on the hyperlink and the context provided by the student posting it. Students were able to post images in the discussion forum but were discouraged from doing so unless the image was free to use or share, which greatly diminished the options for available images originating from the news media. And though hyperlinking is a feature within edX discussion forums, students were not able to embed videos. The complexities of sharing media in the discussion forums may have discouraged students from providing direct access to relevant media examples, instead relying on their own summary of the content. Students were instructed to interact with the media posted to the discussion forum as part of the curriculum, but media users accustomed to a more visual platform may generally have had less enthusiasm for the hyperlink format and thus may have ignored media shared within posts.

The researcher's extensive review of the literature indicates that this is the first time a MOOC has been used as the educational setting for assessing media literacy. Most media literacy education research is conducted in a traditional classroom or as part of a

face-to-face extracurricular program. Media literacy research has been conducted in informal online affinity spaces (Roschke, 2013), but research into online media literacy education, particularly at this scale, is limited.

The MediaLIT MOOC analyzed in this study also offered an opportunity to study the media literacy practices of adults, in particular, but not limited to, those in the 18-34 demographic that has historically been coveted by advertisers to create brand loyalty because of their purchasing power (Dee, 2003; Dennis, 2004). The adult population has in large part been ignored in the media literacy research, but scholars have argued it deserves a closer look (Dennis, 2004; Livingstone et al., 2005).

This research uses a qualitative grounded theory approach to answer the following research questions related to the gatekeeping decisions made by adult participants as they bring "user-generated visibility" (Singer, 2014) to information shared in a digital media literacy MOOC.

The digital literacies framework defines literacy as situated and social, with participants practicing literacy using the queues and context of a particular setting (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). Examining the literacy practices taking place within a particular space – in this case a MOOC – can provide broader insight into how participants practice media literacy in other online spaces (Street, 1998).

RQ1: What literacy practices were identified in the MediaLIT MOOC and how were they defined?

Literacy practices within the MediaLIT MOOC are influenced, at least in part, by the course curriculum and the instructors' guiding questions. However, the themes that

permeate discussion throughout the course are driven by the participants themselves. Analysis of the recurring themes can offer insight into which course concepts resonate with participants.

RQ2: What, if any, media literacy themes emerged from media literacy discussions in the MediaLIT MOOC?

In online spaces, the practice of literacy includes the negotiation of technology and interaction with encoded text beyond words (e.g., images, video, hyperlinks) to develop "big D" Discourses (Gee, 1999). The MOOC platform, particularly one that is delivered in a cMOOC style, provides participants multiple opportunities to engage with the content and other participants, thus potentially creating a social learning environment well suited for studying media literacy.

RQ3: Is the MOOC an effective platform for teaching media literacy?

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

This chapter details the methodology and procedure used for analysis of the discussion taking place within the MediaLIT MOOC.

Analysis in this dissertation examines media literacy practices taking place within a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the underlying principles that inform individual's gatekeeping practices. This chapter explains the process employed to accomplish the research objective. The first section of this chapter describes the reasons for taking a qualitative approach to data analysis. Next, the data collection method and coding process utilized are detailed. The role of the researcher as it relates to data collection and analysis is then described. The following section describes the participants of the MediaLIT MOOC in terms of certain qualitative descriptors, including similarities and differences in the demographic and psychographic characteristics of the group. Limitations of the research design are then detailed.

Qualitative Analysis

Media literacy researchers utilize a number of methodologies across disciplines including sociology, psychology, cultural studies, gender and race studies, communications, and media studies (Koltay, 2014). Much of the media literacy research in the field of mass communication employs quantitative methods such as experimental design to test how media literacy intervention can impact the effects of some media message (Pinkelton et al., 2008; Scharrer, 2006). However, researchers within and

outside of mass communication have also utilized a variety of qualitative methods. In the field of media literacy education, qualitative methods can be useful because they have largely spawned from constructivist philosophy (Caelli et al., 2003), which aligns well with the teaching philosophy in many classrooms. Caelli et al. (2003) note that in qualitative analysis, "humans construct knowledge out of their somewhat subjective engagement with objects in their world (p. 4)." Qualitative analysis "frees the investigator from the burden of forcing *a priori* standards on an audience" (McLeod, Bybee, & Durall, 1982, p. 3).

For this dissertation, the researcher conducted a qualitative constant comparative analysis of participant discussion and blog posts from the 2015 edX-sponsored MOOC MediaLIT: Overcoming Information Overload to answer the research questions. Constant comparative analysis is a widely used process for developing grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which allows for themes to emerge from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Gentles et al. (2015) describe grounded theory as "a flexible method for developing substantive theory that traditionally emphasizes understanding of social processes …" (p. 1773). It is a systematic method for "constructing a theoretical analysis from data, with explicit analytic strategies and implicit guidelines for data collection" (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 347; see also Glaser & Straus, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Charmaz (2006) describes grounded theory as "inductive, comparative, iterative, and interactive." Through each iteration, data are comparatively analyzed until conceptual themes begin to emerge that help inform new theoretical understanding.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) outline guidelines for the data collection and analysis, which they suggest can happen in alternating sequences:

- Maintain a balance between objectivity and sensitivity: the researcher can be shaped by the data as the data are shaped by the researcher.

- Maintain an objective stance: complete objectivity is not possible, but the researcher should take care to acknowledge the subjectivity and "think comparatively" about each unique perspective being presented in the data (p. 43). Additionally, the researcher should periodically step back to and ask, "What is going on here?" (p. 45).

- Develop sensitivity to the meanings in data: the researcher's knowledge and experience "enables us to recognize incidents as being conceptually similar or dissimilar and to give them conceptual names" (p. 47). The researcher should draw upon previous experience to be "sensitive to meaning without forcing our explanations on data" (p. 47).

Qualitative internet research.

Hine (2009) has argued that ethnography helped establish the Internet as a place of important cultural and socially relevant activity. Ethnography can be used to study the social construction of online spaces, and provides opportunities for researchers to themselves engage in the communities as a means for understanding the cultural practices (Hine, 2009). Similarly, other qualitative approaches, like grounded theory, are particularly well-suited for Internet research, as they emphasize the notion that life is contextual and relational, and that paying attention to our everyday experiences from an

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interpretative perspective can result in social inquiry to help deepen our understanding of the world (Angen, 2000). Angen (2000) argues that all human understanding is negotiated within "the culturally informed relationships and experiences, the talk and the text, of our everyday lives" (p. 384).

Markham and Baym (2009) discuss how the Internet has created great opportunities but also great challenges for conducting research. As media have been integrated into all aspects of life, it can be a struggle for researchers to identify and reconcile subject, phenomenon, and the technologies that mediate them. The Internet, with its lack of boundaries and emphasis on asynchronous communication, has muddled ethnographic issues of geography and temporality. Additionally, a "jumbled network of links" makes it difficult but imperative to clearly define the data, as well as what should be considered public and private data (Markham & Baym, 2009, p. xiii). The authors identify six cross-cutting issues raised by conducting qualitative research on the Internet: Research design is always ongoing; the constitution of data is the result of decisions made during the design and conduct of the study; the ethical treatment of human subjects in inductive and context-sensitive; the role of the self in research is subject for reflexive inquiry; research practices are situated; and research requires the ongoing balance of dialectical tensions (Markham & Baym, 2009, p. xix).

Bakardjieva (2009) notes that researchers have great responsibility in deciding how to categorize, slice, and label data in a study. But she argues the Internet is not unique in that regard, nor does she suggest a process different from the study of pre-Internet media. Like all mediated social life, Internet research entails "looking at people,

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their hustle and bustle, their conversations, and their artifacts and texts produced in and through different media" (p. 59). Similarly, Gajjala calls online ethnographic research "situated, immersive, and critical" (p. 64).

The MOOC as a community for analysis.

Data analyzed in this dissertation originated from the seven-week MediaLIT MOOC offered through a joint collaboration with Arizona State University and MOOC platform provider edX. Ananthanarayanan (2015) states that Online Learning Environments (OLEs) like MOOCs are suited for constructivist learning principles, which factor context, community, culture, and communication competencies into the learning process. Philosopher John Dewey (1927) notes that communication functions in contextual environments, and meaning derives from the shared participation in the communication process. Dewey describes communication as "the basis of human fellowship" that make society possible "because of the binding forces of shared information circulating in an organic system" (Carey, 2008, p. 18). Because OLEs are premised on fostering community, a MOOC provides a space for students to "negotiate identity, language, understandings, and relationships for mutual learning and the synthesis of new ideas" (Muller, 2009).

MediaLIT: Overcoming Information Overload Sampling

Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe sampling in grounded theory as "where to go to obtain the data" (p. 201). In this study, the researcher went to the MOOC entitled *MediaLIT: Overcoming Information Overload*, to be the source of the data. The MediaLIT MOOC was developed by Dan Gillmor, internationally recognized media

literacy author and professor of practice at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University (ASU). The course curriculum is based on Gillmor's 2010 book *Mediactive,* as well as a for-credit media literacy course he teaches at the university. The course is designed to help participants gain a better understanding of how the media operate and to provide principles for being a more active media consumer and creator. In the spring of 2015, Gillmor and a team of instructional designers at ASU partnered with the online education platform edX to scale the ASU course for a MOOC audience at low or no cost.

The MediaLIT MOOC consisted of weekly modules featuring brief video lessons and selected readings. One additional feature of the course is a series of nearly 30 guest interviews from key figures in the world of American journalism, media criticism, technology, and culture. Learners participated in a pre- and post-course survey, weekly quizzes, discussion boards, and blog posts. The instructor and three teaching assistants, including this researcher, facilitated the discussion forums that served as the basis for this analysis. The course is currently archived at https://www.edx.org/course/media-lit-overcoming-information-asux-mco425x

EdX offered MediaLIT in July 2015. Participants had two enrollment options: a free, honor-system offering in which participants complete course assignments and activities for personal educational attainment, and an ID-verified offering in which participants completing the course received a Verified Certificate of Completion. The cost for the ID-verified option was $25. EdX issued 59 ID-verified certificates and 252 honor certificates to MediaLIT participants, for a completion total of 311 participants.

Those seeking a completion certificate of any kind were required to complete all graded assignments: weekly multiple-choice quizzes and two blog posts (in weeks 4 and 6), which were self-graded by participants answering an honor-system true/false question about whether they completed the blog post. On the first day of class, July 5, 2015, course enrollment was 2,814. Enrollment increased throughout the seven weeks of the course, peaking at 4,446 on the last day of the original course offering. A certification rate of 7-11%, depending on enrollment at different points in the course, is in line with findings from an MIT and Harvard University study of MOOCs (Chuang & Ho, 2016).

EdX still lists MediaLIT as a course offering on its site, though the active discussion aspects of the course are no longer available. People continue to sign up for the course; at the time of this writing on February 15, 2018, 6,591 participants were enrolled in the course and total enrollment (the number of participants ever to have enrolled in the course) reached 8,082.

Upon enrolling in the course, students self-identified certain demographic characteristics. Though the MediaLIT course content focused predominantly on Western media—specifically U.S. media organizations—participants represented 149 countries, including seven of the 10 most censored countries in the world, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2015) (see Figure 2). The largest percentage of participants resided in the U.S., at 36% of the total course population, with India and Canada making up the top 3, at 6% and 4% respectively. Fifty-four percent of the participants were male and 45% were female. The median age of participants was 34; 21.9% were 25 and under, 44% were 26-40, and 34.1% were 41+. The vast majority of

participants were college educated; 40.8% were college graduates and 36.7% held

advanced degrees. Only 20% of participants identified as having a high school diploma or

less education.
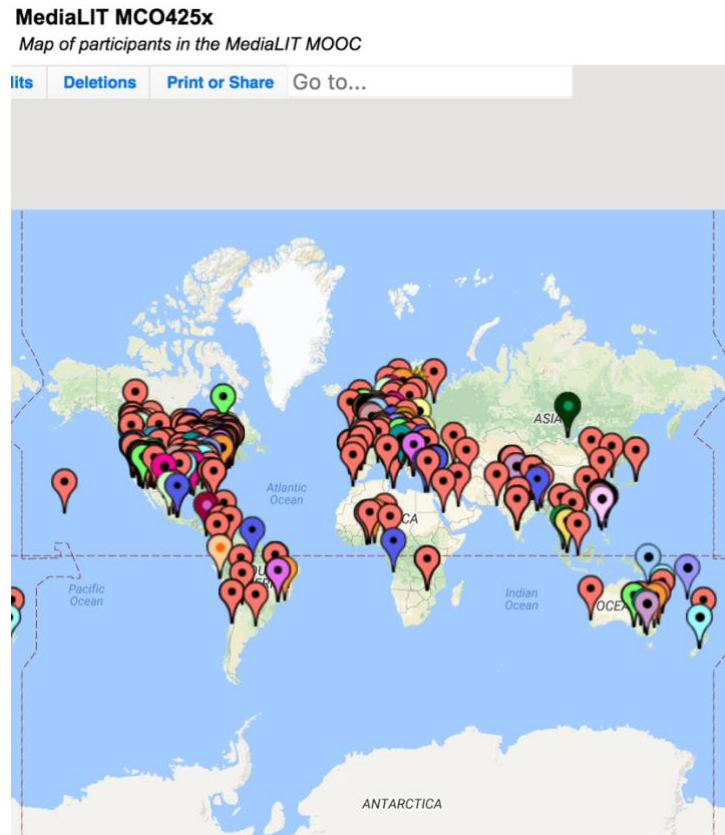
Figure 2. Map of MediaLIT MOOC participants' countries of origin.

In keeping with common findings in the MOOC literature (Jordan, 2013), the

number of active users within the MediaLIT course constituted a small percentage of the

total enrollees. An illustration of this is the weekly multiple-choice quizzes. Since the

course began, the total number of responses garnered on the Week 1 Quiz is 774, or

10.5% of the total enrollment. The numbers are much lower for the Week 6 Quiz, the last

week a quiz was offered in the course, with 338 total responses, or 4.5% of the total

enrollment.

This sample is purposive and self-selected since it comprises students who have

elected to take the course. This suggests an interest in lifelong learning and media issues,

and many of the participants did disclosed that they came from related fields such as

journalism, library science, and communications. However, many of the attributes of the

MOOC may be viewed as akin to those of an affinity space in which users come together

to share a common interest (Gee, 2007). Thus, the learning and literacy practices taking

place are situated within the MOOC, which supports the sociocultural view of media

literacy outlined in the research. The purposive sample made two novel research

opportunities possible: the opportunity to analyze media literacy practices of adult

learners on a MOOC educational platform. Further, the adult sample is consistent with a

view of media literacy as an ongoing and context-dependent state (Rosenthal, 2012).

Discussion among participants in the MOOC happened in two places within the

course: the discussion board and the blogs. The number of active users in these areas was

similarly small compared to total enrollment. However, the corpus of conversation paint a

rich and robust of picture of key themes that resonate from the course material. The data

utilized in this research is derived from the discussion board activity and blog posts and

will now be described in greater detail.

MediaLIT discussion boards and blogs.

The MediaLIT course discussion board was a weekly activity in which course

instructors provided suggested discussion prompts related to course concepts or current

events for reflection and conversation. Participants could also choose their own relevant topics, though the majority of the discussion posts were in response to the suggested prompts. Participants were encouraged to share hyperlinks to media in order to provide specific examples for their discussion and to comment on others' posts to spark two-way conversation. Interactive user features built into the edX design also allowed participants to vote on posts they liked and to follow posts so as to be notified when new comments were added. Though the discussion board conversations were not graded, they garnered active participation. The conversation in Week 1 generated nearly 300 original posts.

Another component for discussion in the course was the weekly blog. Participants were tasked with keeping a weekly blog of 300-500 words with the goal of becoming an expert media critic on a subject for which they already had a lot of knowledge and were passionate. The purpose of the blog was not to write about their chosen topic, the way a sports blogger would blog about sports-related topics, for instance, but rather it provided an opportunity for students to critique how the media cover their topic. Again, participants provided links to outside sources to reinforce their opinions and were encouraged to comment on others' blogs.

Open-ended communication took two forms in the MOOC: original thoughts posted to the discussion board or blog, and responses to other participants' posts. For the purpose of deeper analysis of the research questions, discussion is delineated from conversation. Discussion includes original discussion board and blog posts, that is, those posts that are not in response to another participants' communication. These posts may have been read by others or voted on, but no comments were made. Conversation

encompasses the posts and subsequent comments that produce multi-way communication between participants.

The number of students who participated in the ungraded, open-ended communication aspects of the course was a small subset of the total enrollment, though many of these participants were prolific in their original posts and exchanges with other students.

Though encouraged by MOOC facilitators to engage in conversation with other participants, the large number of participants and the design of the edX discussion platform impeded multi-way conversation in the forums. The edX discussion platform featured two columns: a main column showing a selected discussion board post, and a sidebar that included a list of the most recent posts (see Figure 3). The sidebar design includes a filter option that allows users to sort posts by recent activity, most activity, and by most votes, as well as an open search bar for users to find posts on a specific topic; however, these features were not highlighted by staff as ways to more easily navigate the discussion board. Without using the filter features, the sidebar displays approximately six of the most recent posts. Based on the fact that many participants created new discussion threads rather than responding to existing threads, it can be surmised that many participants did not use the filtering features to find related posts, and instead simply began an original post. The volume of original discussion posts within the forum made it difficult to wade through to find posts of interest. Thus, the discussion boards mostly comprised original posts with few comments. Despite the technical limitations, however, some topics did inspire ample two-way (or more) conversation.
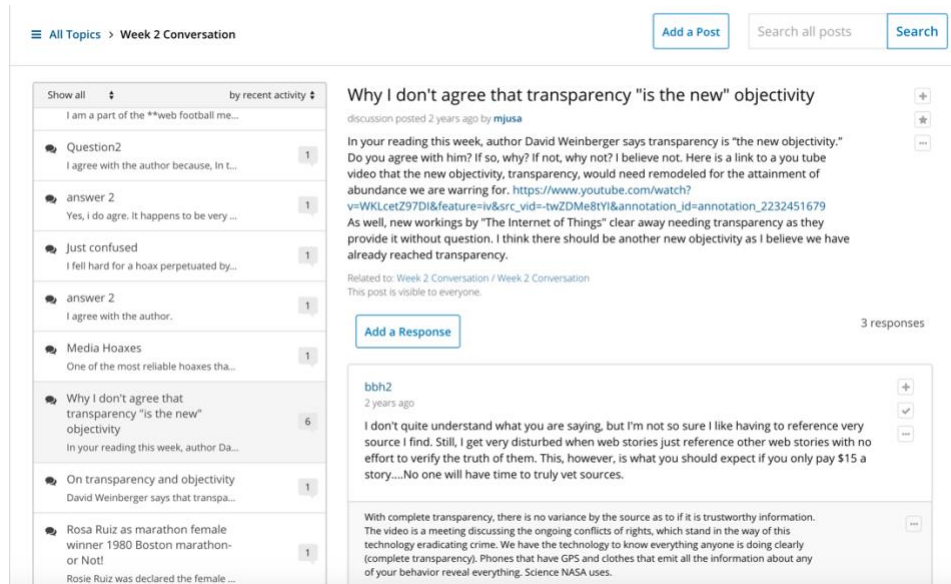
Figure 3. Screenshot of the discussion board in the edX platform.

Conversation in the form of comments among participants took shape in two main ways. First, conversation was used to enhance community through the sharing of experiences, thereby increasing understanding and highlighting commonalities among participants. The shared experiences within the MOOC are particularly rich because of the international make-up of the participants. Experiences were shared from different global worldviews, engendering new understandings and, at times, revealing similarities with regard to media principles, responsibilities, and actions across cultures. Secondly, conversation fostered information exchange, such that participants could extend their understanding on a particular topic or engage in civil discourse when participants disagreed about the veracity of certain information shared in the discussion. Hyperlinks were most prevalent in the posts in which participants exchanged information, with the links serving as examples or justification for the writer's assertions.

Coding Discussion and Blogs

Each week, course discussion was framed by guiding questions the instructors posed in reference to the week's materials, though participants were also encouraged to write about anything relevant to the course. Most discussion did align with the instructors' suggested questions, with participants most commonly writing about their impressions of the key course concepts introduced each week. In these posts, participants synthesized what they had learned during the week and either expressed agreement or disagreement with the concept or shared examples of how the concept applied to their own experience, often using hyperlinks to outside resources to emphasize their point.

Blog posts topics were generated using a different method. Participants selected a topic about which to blog, with the goal of becoming a media critic. Instructors again provided guiding questions in which to frame their responses. Though the topics the participants selected were wide-ranging, the tools they used to analyze media coverage were gleaned from course materials. Despite their differences in terms of assignment prompts, the focus for both the discussion board and blogs was on the way participants interacted with media, as informed by the course content. Thus, discussion board and blog posts were analyzed together for common themes during the first round of coding.

Original discussion and blog posts and their ensuing comments were treated the same as units of analysis during the coding process. Each new entry, whether original post or comment on a post, was similarly coded for common themes. However, the researcher did conduct subsequent analysis of the types communication to gain a better understanding of the types of topics that elicited more conversation.

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An initial round of in vivo descriptive coding of nearly 1,200 discussion and blog posts in the MediaLIT MOOC revealed several recurring concepts. In vivo coding is a process that derives codes from terms that are used by the participants themselves (Saldaña, 2015). Qualitative field researchers can use both *etic* and *emic* perspectives when coding data (Babbie, 2013). Deriving from anthropology, in an etic approach the research takes a more distant and objective approach to the data, whereas in an emic approach, the researcher takes on the point of view of those being studied, drawing connections between the words and phrases used by the participants themselves (Babbie, 2013). During the first round of coding, the researcher used both etic and emic approaches. The researcher annotated the margins of each post and comment with objective key words or phrases that derived straight from the course materials where they appeared. In a more emic approach, the researcher also marked unique representative and illuminating quotes and phrases that derived directly from the participants. The first round of coding ended with a substantial list of commonly cited words and phrases. Though most of the conversation in the course is rooted in the instructors' guided questions, the ways in which course content is reflected back through discussion board and blog posts stems from participants' interpretations of the material.

Two subsequent rounds of axial coding were completed to reorganize similar codes into larger categories (Charmaz, 2014). Common themes among codes derived from course material and those that sprang from participants were collapsed into larger groups based on frequency and similarity. Representative phrases and quotes were denoted to use as examples in the findings in chapter 4. At this time, posts were sorted

into nine thematic categories (see Appendix C for the complete list of categories). In the final round of coding, the categories were sorted into two overarching categories that reflected a dominant theme of responsibility: 1) categories for which the media have responsibility and 2) categories for which individual media users should take responsibility.

Participant Reflection Activities

The primary purpose of this qualitative analysis was to identify the media literacy practices taking shape within the MediaLIT MOOC in order to develop theory related to individual gatekeeping practices. Thus, the primary coding included only the activities designed to apply course concepts in participant discussion. However, course participants were also asked in the final week of the course to reflect upon the course experience and the media literacy concepts and competencies they felt were most salient and beneficial in their own lives. Additionally, participants were given an opportunity to further reflect and comment on the course experience 18 months after the course ended in January 2017; this follow-up survey garnered 39 responses. Participant responses to the two reflection opportunities were analyzed separately from the rest of the discussion posts, using the same constant comparative method, to provide additional insight into the effectiveness of the course in meeting the educational objectives of developing more critical and media literate users. Post-course reflection responses also help assess the enduring impact of course concepts in everyday life.

The Researcher's Role

Caelli et al. (2013) note that the researcher's role in qualitative analysis typically is formed in part by the researcher's pre-suppositions and history with the subject or data, which can shape the inquiry:

> A researcher's motives for engaging with a particular study topic are never a naïve choice. The notion of researchers as value neutral observers has long been challenged and overturned. Notions of researchers being able to 'bracket' personal values and prior knowledge of a substantive field are open to question and debate. To some extent, it depends on one's interpretation of bracketing. Some see it as a way of identifying and managing the researcher's assumptions and presuppositions about the phenomenon (p. 9-10).

Babbie (2013) describes various stances a qualitative researcher can take during field research, from the complete outsider perspective to one of a complete participant. Though social science tends to favor objectivity in field research, Lofland et al. (2006) point out the benefits of being immersed in a subject with "insider knowledge, skill, or understanding" (p. 70, as quoted in Babbie, 2013, p. 301).

This researcher's personal and academic journey has informed this project and should be noted here. My interest in media literacy began while teaching high school journalism from 2003-2012. During that time, digital and mobile technology evolved in such a profound way, such that students went from using the web on desktop computers in the library to carrying a pocket-sized encyclopedia everywhere they went. Social networking sites also emerged during that time; the earliest adopters I observed used Live

Journal, then more joined in on MySpace, finally reaching mass adoption with Facebook and Twitter (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). As a media teacher, I witnessed the ways in which students' interaction with media became more multi-faceted, complex, organic, and fraught with misinformation and confusion. Students were becoming more adept at using technological devices and tools, but in my anecdotal observation, did not seem to be getting better at discerning credible information online. As people's media use increases in quantity and scope, and as their role shifts from a passive to active one, I wanted to know how they were managing this sea change. What new skills did they need … and where were they going to learn them? My experience teaching and helping shape high school journalists was rooted in journalist practices and values. But over time it became evident to me that practices would in most cases would be applied by my students in an audience capacity, as most of them would not choose journalism as a profession. I understood the value of journalism as a set of practices that would be transferrable to any profession, and I often wished more students would be exposed to the curriculum. This lead me to an interest in studying media literacy.

Though my research path started through my interactions with young people, the opportunity to explore adult media literacy education presented itself when Dan Gillmor decided to scale his media literacy course to a MOOC. I had previously been a teaching assistant in Gillmor's media literacy course at ASU, and I was part of the instructional team that developed the MOOC. I helped develop course materials, including assisting in selecting reading assignments, developing multiple-choice test questions, drafting discussion prompts, troubleshooting course issues, and facilitating participant discussion.

My close relationship to the course experience has informed my position as a researcher. Although I took an objective approach to coding and analysis, my position is not one of a neutral observer. This research process is inherently reflexive, as it stems from personal and professional experience. I introduced myself both as a member of the course team and as a researcher, and participants were made aware that course assignments would be subject to analysis, but that participants' identities would remain confidential (see Appendix A for invitation to research in edX MediaLIT MOOC).

I believe my role to be someplace in between neutral observer and participant observer. I did not participate in the discussion or blog discussion other than to thank people for posting, as I did not want to influence the conversation. However, I cannot state definitively that my presence as course teaching assistant and researcher did not have an impact on participants. The course designers' intent of the discussion is that it was "for participants, by participants," and my observations indicate that this is, in fact, the way it took shape.

However, as with any educational intervention, the MediaLIT MOOC discussion activities were designed to measure the retention and application of course objectives set by instructors – including me. It can be argued that knowledge of course objectives always directly impacts how learners respond to an assignment (CAN I CITE THIS); thus, the instructor plays an integral role. My dual role of educator and researcher afforded me a connection with the material that resulted in a deep reading of the discussion situated in its context.

Limitations of the Research Design

In addition to possible subjectivity based on the researcher's role in the MOOC, the research design has the following limitations:

- Because the population observed self-selected to participate in a MOOC on the subject of media literacy, it indicates an awareness of the concept of media literacy and a desire to learn more. Thus, the insights gleaned from participants may not be indicative of populations that do not have the same awareness or interest in the subject.

- The fact that course instructors provided suggestions for discussion prompts helped guide the discussion in certain directions, so the major themes that arose from the data are not as organic as they would be in an undirected conversation.

- Technical limitations of the edX platform, as well as individual participant's varying technical skills, may have hindered the amount of back-and-forth conversation taking place in the course. Content of original discussion board and blogs posts provided plenty of rich description; however, more interaction between participants would have provided an additional level of depth to the analysis.

Definitions

With the methodology, coding process, and analysis procedures delineated, conceptual and operational definitions were created to offer further insight into the coding process. Definitions included in the glossary of terms (page viii) are derived from

the literature, the MediaLIT MOOC curriculum and course materials, and from the participants themselves. The definitions help ground the use of certain key words and phrases within the community from which the data were derived and establish meanings specific to the space.

Operational definitions come from the literature and were used to inform the research procedures. Conceptual definitions are based on relevant literature and from MediaLIT MOOC course curriculum. Conceptual definitions offered guidance during the coding process, as participants utilized the terms in relation to other terms, which allowed for in vivo categories to be folded together under larger umbrella categories during rounds of axial coding.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter details the findings from several rounds of open coding of nearly

1,200 discussion board and blog posts shared in the MediaLIT MOOC. The purpose of

the analysis was to answer research questions about the media literacy practices taking

place among participants. Given the constructivist properties of the course, the open-

ended nature of the discussion assignments, and the instructors' encouragement of

discussion and conversation, the corpus of discussion offers a rich depiction of an

informal learning community sharing and fostering knowledge about how media interact

with people's daily life.

Discussions in the MediaLIT MOOC can be described as media literacy practices

because they reveal the ways in which participants navigate, interact with, and negotiate

meaning in the media they consume. Daer describes this as "wonderful instantiations of

the most contemporary knowledge about how students learn and participate with media

communities in their context of use" (p. 193). Because media literacy practices are

situated in the learning environment, the bulk of the ideas shared in the discussion forums

stemmed from course materials.

Participants wrote about their impressions of key course concepts introduced each

week. For both the discussion board and the blog assignment, instructors provided around

three prompts to elicit discussion related to course readings and other instructional

materials introduced during the week (see Appendix B); however, participants were

encouraged to write about any topic relevant to the course, and no subject was considered

out of bounds. Because of the large number of participants, instructors and teaching assistants facilitated discussion by regularly replying to posts, as well as jump-starting discussion or bringing to participants' attention a timely or salient topic that had not yet been covered within the discussion. Although the course team did, at times, influence discussion by introducing topics, there was no intent to sway opinions, or to redirect discussion toward or away from certain topics. Rather, the goal was to reinforce key concepts that aligned with intended course educational outcomes.

In the most common type of post found within the course, participants synthesized what they had learned during the week and either expressed agreement or disagreement with the concept. Hyperlinks were used regularly in discussion to aid in information exchange and provide specific examples to support a writer's assertions. In addition to hyperlinks, some participants also shared images, screenshots, and other visuals as supporting material.

Another popular type of post found in the MediaLIT MOOC involved participants sharing personal experiences related to course concepts. In these posts, participants attempted to establish common understanding within the group based on their own interactions with media. Other posts featured in the MediaLIT MOOC include posts in which participants ask questions of the group to seek understanding or additional points of view, and posts expressing opinions about the course itself.

After employing several rounds of open coding using a constant comparative analysis, nine thematic categories emerged from the course discussion. Thematic categories were identified during the coding process as those key concepts that were

regularly discussed and debated throughout the duration of the course (see Appendix C for a complete list of categories and themes). Discussion posts were grouped based on words and phrases participants used to assert their understanding or express their opinion. Analysis revealed the nine thematic categories could further be separated into two main categories related to ownership over gatekeeping and media literacy practices: the practices the media have responsibility for, and the practices for which individual media users have responsibility.

Media Responsibility

In the main category of "media responsibility," participants discussed media literacy concepts that relate to the obligation media organizations have to keep the public informed. Wheareas participants acknowledge a need to take responsibility for one's own media use, much discussion examined the norms, routines, and processes of the professional media that contribute to aspects of information overload and confusion. Discussion centered on topics introduced in course lectures and that emerged from subsequent discussion among participants. Categories presented in discussion that emphasized a responsibility on the media's part include: the public's need for information that is accurate, complete, and transparent; the role profit plays in the agenda of commercial media; and the affordances of digital technology in gathering, displaying, and disseminating information. In discussions about media responsibility, participants recognize that there are a number of external forces that impact the gathering and dissemination of news, but they also call attention to journalistic practices—both good and bad—that contribute to the current confusion and media overload.

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The breaking news cycle of digital media.

The rush to be first to "break" a story is one of the most discussed topics in the MediaLIT course, with an emphasis on the impact social media has on the reporting of the news. As one participant put it, "...the breaking news-hysteria leads to something I would call the 'chain of shame'." Others commented that the rush to be first is almost always to blame for the spread of misinformation, and that the media's priority should be to be right, not first. One participant noted, "I always feel like in the digital world it is about who gets the story first. It is blurbs of information, not depth analysis." In this fast-paced news environment, fact-checking is often an afterthought, as one participant notes: "We live in this era where news is created as it happens without doing a background check and fact finding." To one participant it seems the goal of news today is only to report initial findings, not to provide detailed descriptions or analysis of current events. But other participants lament the lack of depth on the part of the media, noting that there is such a glut of information available that media users need "more intelligent analysis" to help uncover the most important information and to make sense of it.

When it comes to breaking news in the digital and social media environment, participants note that manner and form do affect content. The way an article is presented on digital media, for instance, in terms of aesthetic details like the attention-grabbing headline, the visuals, the accompanying posts when shared on SNS, and the narrative frame the journalist uses to report the story can impact the audience's reaction to and understanding of the information.

However, participants also recognize the important public service that breaking news offers. In the context of natural disasters and other events with large-scale impact, one participant notes: "TV news provides a lifeline to an uncertain world." Some point to the immediacy of social media to aid in such situations, though others suggest social media should only be used as a breaking news mechanism when safety is involved. Further, participants discussed social networking sites, specifically Twitter, as a good source to verify news, based on the trustworthiness of certain users.

Affordances of social media.

Though the rush to get "the scoop," or be the first to break news is as old as mass media itself, technological affordances of social networking sites have exponentially sped up the reporting process to create a news environment in which news seems to break nearly every moment. One participant commented that "we are all sort of forced to be connected" because of the widespread saturation of computers, tablets, and phones. In this ambient news environment (Hermida, 2010a) users face a constant "bombardment" of information from disparate sources that is not prioritized by reputability or traditional notions of newsworthiness, but rather in a steady chronological stream manipulated by proprietary algorithms adjusted for users' personal interests and beliefs (Pariser, 2011). One MOOC participant described this as domination by a few large digital media corporations to "substantially influence users' consumption patterns."

Media organizations working within such algorithm-based platforms are continuously vying for eyeballs or, more accurately, the clicks that account for those eyeballs when it comes to profit. Thus, headlines are crafted to be clickbait to entice

readers and drive revenue. Not all clickbait headlines are intentionally misleading, but they give new meaning to the age-old journalistic practice of "if it bleeds, it leads" with their potential to spread potentially misleading headlines through social sharing. The unique sharing aspect of social media makes information distributed in this manner more susceptible to feeding an "online viral hoax beast" or quickly diffusing false information. The low barrier to content creation also enables citizen journalists to become part of the reporting process, with both good and bad results on sites like Twitter and Reddit. When coupled with the personalization affordances of social media, participants note that social networks can enable issue and political polarization. The complexities of how information lands in people's social news feeds are often lost on the typical user, prompting one participant to write "[o]ur job as active media consumers is to advocate for media literacy."

For adult media users, media literacy education is not likely to come from formal school curriculum, but rather it could be integrated into the practices of journalism organizations and the social media companies that amplify news.

Media ownership and propaganda.

The "corporate domination of news" is a troubling problem that has created the intense rush to break news. One participant commented, "I don't believe in capital (or free market for that matter) as a driver for the seek [*sic*] of truth." Some participants were particularly dubious of any claims of objectivity on the part of commercial media. One commented, "I consider all mainstream media to be sourced from the industry of mass media." Another said, "Any student of history will tell you that the media is a propaganda

tool. It's used to manipulate public opinion by playing on emotion." Throughout several conversations, participants discussed the need to ask, "Who stands to profit?" and "What's not being covered?"

The 21st century has not been kind to media organizations. The shift to digital media has seen advertising and subscription rates plummet, forcing traditional media organizations to find new revenue streams. Since the first news publications moved online in the late 1990s, organizations have tried, and mostly failed, to create a variety of new digital media revenue models. The failure to recover from loss of traditional revenue has resulted in mass layoffs across the journalism industry; from 2001 to 2016 the newspaper industry lost more than half its employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Participants discussed how budget constraints have negatively impacted reporting and editing processes, allowing for more errors and bad judgment that have compromised even the most reputable sources.

Media organizations rely on advertising revenue to keep costs down for the users. Low-cost access to news is a good thing for the health of a democracy, as one participant pointed out that "news has to be affordable, not a luxury to the common man." However, much skepticism emerged within the conversation of media ownership of the for-profit, advertising-based model of journalism, particularly in the desperate times wrought by digital media. One participant noted, "[The] overreach of advertising can ruin credibility and editorial independence." Others suggested that stories are often skewed for profit and that media are "controlled by lobbyists and corporate interests." Media consolidation by a few large corporations was a troubling trend among participants, because it allows for

corporate ideologies to dominate the news agenda. And, in general, participants were not convinced that commercial media entities could remain independent from pressure from their advertisers or corporate owners. As one participant commented:

> I trust [mainstream news] to be concerned with getting the facts right and I trust them to be conscientious of journalistic ethics. However, I don't trust the whole mainstream media complex to transmit a value system that is free of the self-interest of their owners.

An example of participants' skepticism toward advertising is illustrated in a discussion about Boing Boing, a popular online site that calls itself "A Directory of Mostly Wonderful Things," in which fans lamented a loss of credibility when the site took on more ads. Driving profits means delivering information to the masses. Participants pointed out that in order to appeal to a broad audience, news has been "dumbed down" and sensationalized to cater to the "lowest common denominator." Though this is not new in digital media, what has changed is the sheer amount of information available, making it difficult to determine credibility of certain sources, and putting the onus on the individual to be responsible for informed judgment. Participants noted that educated publics are better able to see through corporate and editorial agendas to determine credibility, leaving less educated media users susceptible to misinformation.

In the "Age of Clickbait," journalists write sensational headlines that often "don't reflect the content of the story" to entice readers to click a link to a story in an effort to drive advertising revenue. Within the MOOC discussion board, clickbait was often cited as misleading and responsible for "feeding the beast" of perpetuating misinformation,

rumors, and hoaxes. Participants observed, "Misinformation may be a dirty trick, but it works," and "When marketing replaced subscriptions we lost journalism and replaced it with consumption of emotional value."

Another participant lamented clickbait as a necessary evil to save quality reporting:

If we stop consuming the media which contain the clickbait, then any of the last vestiges of quality press reporting will go to the wall, and I don't want to live in a world where unattributed, anonymous blogs and industry-funded websites become the starting point for newsgathering.

However, another participant saw the current clickbait situation as an opportunity for positive change:

The concept that was discussed about changing journalists' viewpoints from whether people 'read my entire piece of blog about my article' to 'whether the piece informed the consumer and enhanced their ability to be an active citizen' illustrates how responsible journalism and media literacy can ideally connect.

Within the subject of advertising came discussion about potentially deceptive advertising techniques used in digital environments, namely sponsored content or native advertising. Though the practice is not new or exclusive to digital media, participants commented that these types of paid digital content in online environments are often not labeled clearly and can be confusing to average readers, making it harder to determine "who is paying and why." This line has the potential to blur even more as some media organizations utilize a "pay to play" model with contributing writers. Native advertising

can further obscure itself on social networks, appearing in a stream alongside non-sponsored content. But native advertising was not seen as all bad, as one participant noted: "Native advertising serves a business purpose. If people understand what that is, it can help them be skeptical. It needs clear labels." Others agreed, noting that sponsored content can be beneficial when it adheres to journalistic codes of conduct and is transparently labeled. After all, some note, selling something doesn't always mean trying to fool someone. There was also acknowledgment that public relations efforts drive much of the blurred content, particularly in the areas of science and health reporting.

International MOOC participants brought to attention some of the more troubling aspects of media control in countries outside the United States, noting that fake news persists around the world. Many participants came from countries where state-controlled media is the norm, thus reflecting a pro-government bias. Participants described how difficult it can be to verify information or find alternative viewpoints, even when they have access to an open Internet. One participant asked, "What are the ways to tackle such indoctrination/misinformation in cases when alternative information on the subject can only be found on foreign language websites (but you can't speak it and Google Translate gives a weird translation)?"

Whether in the United States or abroad, many participants feel that many media messages are tantamount to propaganda, noting the inherent dangers in the media serving as a "mouthpiece of government administration." In this realm, the media can take an us versus them stance, with one participant commenting that "the first casualty of war is truth."

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Skepticism about corporate and partisan media.

The rise in popularity of partisan pundits on cable television news was another popular topic in the course. As one commenter noted: "This is America, where lying on the news is at least somewhat legal. Personally, I find the mainstream media highly intriguing because it shows us the best and worst of our society." Another described this phenomenon by saying, "We are surrounded by superlatives and experts." One particularly damaging byproduct of the ubiquity of political pundits is that news consumers lacking media literacy education may not be able to distinguish between fact and opinion, a notion supported by research by American Press Institute (2017). The incendiary nature of much political commentary programming can propagate fear and misinformation, which can be made exponentially worse by being spread on social media. As one participant noted, "Hate and prejudice don't do fact checking." This is often compounded by the fact that media—especially cable news—often target a "predefined audience" that is seeking information from a specific point of view.

Participants observed that much of the content created for partisan news outlets, especially on cable television, could better be classified as commentary than news. The overreliance on pundits to share information can create confusion with less media savvy audiences who may mistake it for fact. Further, cable television reporters often dip into the commentary realm by providing their opinion on a particular news story, which further muddies the water between fact and opinion. This line is too blurry for many participants, with one stating that, "In my mind, any kind of commentary should be left to commentators."

U.S. election coverage.

As MediaLIT MOOC discussions were taking place in July 2015, the U.S. presidential election was getting underway. When viewed in the light of hindsight, participant discussion about election coverage at this early stage is especially instructive. *The New York Times'* scoop that mischaracterized Hillary Clinton as being under criminal investigation for using a personal email server, and the subsequent take-down of the story by the *Times'* then-public editor Margaret Sullivan and other news organizations, broke during the course, leading to discussion about lasting damage done to both the paper's credibility and the Clinton campaign. Regarding Sullivan's critical column about the report, one participant wrote:

> One paragraph in her report gave me pause to think and still has me pondering this: 'Losing the story to another news outlet would have been a far, far better outcome than publishing an unfair story and damaging The Times's reputation for accuracy.' Is this true? Once upon a time it was true. But is it still true today? And will it always remain true? When the ad folks total up the metrics for this story, even with errors, will they say it is net positive or negative? Scoops drive traffic and $$$. Corrections don't necessarily have an equally powerful downside.
> So I am wondering, will people always be willing to pay for accuracy? And will they be willing to pay enough to support a news organisation [*sic*] when so much of the world is chasing clicks? We hope so. But from where I sit, the trend doesn't look good.

Another election story making news during the MediaLIT course was *Huffington Post's* editorial decision to cover Donald Trump as an entertainer, not a politician. At the time, HuffPo editors said they would not treat Trump as a legitimate candidate because "Trump's campaign is a sideshow. We won't take the bait. If you're interested in what The Donald has to say, you'll find it next to our stories on the Kardashians and The Bachelorette" (Kludt, 2015). The decision prompted one MOOC participant from Australia to comment:

> I find it quite curious as to why they editors have decided to do this. My own judgements conclude that Huffington Post is risking the reputation and credibility of their journalists and their reporting to make a strong stand that American politics itself must be taken seriously.… Huffington Post refuses to play Trump's game and I suspect their decision to place him in the Entertainment section is partly a long-term strategy to ensure he will never be taken seriously as a political candidate now or in the future. I agree with this action despite my niggling concerns that Huffington Post is neglecting its duty to report on all candidates regardless.

Objectivity and other journalistic practices.

MediaLIT participants point to several traditional and digital journalistic practices as prohibitive to the pursuit and dissemination of quality journalism. The journalistic practice of objectivity, introduced in week 2 of the course, describes journalists' goal of achieving balance in a story, prompting them to look for sources to cover different sides of a story. Participants note that this can lead to giving equal weight to sides of stories

that don't deserve it, which Gillmor describes as the two-sides fallacy, a phenomenon that discussants found particularly common in science writing. One participant referred to this as a "…he said-she said regurgitation of the faux debate over the evidence." Another participant, a 30-year journalist said, "I more and more believe the traditional pattern of objectivity is not fit to survive in the journalism of the future …. Journalists have to come out from the media brand's [*sic*] and the newsroom's namelessness." In an attempt to produce conflict through two supposedly equal, opposing sides to a story forces "[c]onsumers of information to have to look for the truth, which I would suspect lies somewhere in the middle." Whereas one participant commented that it can be frustrating to see journalists attempting to create two equal sides to certain stories, another participant in the media business said,

> while I agree we don't have an obligation to give credence to something like evolution deniers or the people who really, really don't think anyone has actually visited the moon, I believe we have an obligation to try to be fair when two sides each have valid arguments.

Another participant suggested that media often operate as a "pendulum of extremes."

Some participants believe the push for objectivity ignores the fact that people – including journalists – have their own inherent perspectives and biases brought about by their personal experiences. One participant went as far as to state that "news is always opinion," and another suggested hiring more diverse newsrooms to bring different perspectives, as opposed to attempting to neutralize all perspective beyond the "view

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from nowhere" (Rosen, 2010). Many participants pointed to the use the of hyperlinks to primary sources or background material as a way to help transparency in reporting, noting that transparency may be a more realistic news value to pursue than objectivity. The debate over the importance of transparency versus objectivity elicited much conversation. A common sentiment was that transparency is an important part of the reporting process, but that it was not enough in itself to equal truth or credibility. One participant noted, "Transparency is a prerequisite for successfully analyzing bias, but it does not constitute objectivity."

A common complaint of the media among MOOC participants was a lack of depth in reporting and other so-called "lazy" reporting practices that can diminish credibility and increase mistakes. With the focus on timeliness and breaking news, particularly in local news, many participants noted that journalists often rely on anonymous sources and provide only basic information on a topic. Since many media users often refer to the integrity and qualification of sources to determine credibility, overuse of anonymous sources can have a damning effect on the public's perception of a story.

To combat some of the unintentional missteps that can occur in the reporting process, participants commented that journalists need to have ongoing professional development, including explicit media literacy training.

Science and health reporting.

When it comes to the availability of science and health information, one MOOC participant noted that, "The Internet is both a blessing and a curse." In several MOOC

discussions, participants found that many of the worst shortcomings of the media showed themselves in reporting on science- and health-related issues. The complexities of science and health topics can easily lead to confusion and even panic, and participants in part blame undereducated reporters for perpetuating fear by overstating or misinterpreting health and science claims. Clickbait headlines can be particularly egregious when relaying results of scientific studies, by overblowing or even incorrectly reporting results. Participants note that a lack of data literacy plays a large role in the spread of health information, as journalists and their audience have difficulty interpreting statistics. As one participant pointed out, "Numbers can mean anything when framed a certain way." Further, the agenda of a particular news outlet must be considered when media users evaluate science and health reporting. So whether intentional or not, bad reporting can have deep implications on the public's understanding of science and health discoveries. Participants stressed the importance of ensuring journalists are properly trained in explaining and relaying complicated information so that misinformation does not originate from the media organization.

Media literacy can change users' perception of the media.

Finally, participants recognize that as they became more cognizant of their own media literacy practices as the course progressed, they also became more aware of the shortcomings of media organizations and the important responsibility they have as individuals to fill that gap by taking time to explore multiple sources of information. As part of the blog assignment, one participant found:

my final conclusion is that I had strong prejudices about the reliability of Italian

media about the question of secularism in Italy: I thought left-oriented news sites

were more reliable than right-oriented news sites but I must say this is definitely

not the case: they both tend to first get their point of view secured than [*sic*]

getting the piece of news right.

 Similarly, one participant found with regard to the coverage of the 2016 U.S.

presidential election that media coverage dumbs down/makes mockery of elections.

"Becoming more adept at media literacy is leaving me frustrated at 'crap' in some

coverage."

Media User Responsibility

The second major category to emerge from the themes present in MediaLIT

MOOC discussion is that of "media user responsibility." Discussion in this category

includes topics that focus on ways in which media consumers can utilize tools and skills

to help them make sense of the omnipresent media. In discussions centered on media

consumer responsibility, participants recognize that users are ultimately in control of the

media they consume, but that the deluge of information that abounds in the digital sphere

can make it difficult to manage. As one participant notes: "The conveying of information

has … transformed, from a streamlined and simple process to what can be simply

described as 'chaos.'" In a chaotic digital media environment, consumers must have the

tools and competencies to "perform a reliability check on the media they consume," as

one participant described it.

Confirmation bias and the backfire effect.

The ability to personalize news in one's social media feeds and when searching online helps cut through the clutter of media messages, but it can result in people seeing only the news they want to see, and that they want to believe, an echo chamber that can have polarizing effects. Participants discussed that people have deeply held beliefs that often conflict with facts, and that selective news curation can lead to an information diet that merely confirms those biases. Many participants admitted to following news that matched their own opinion. During discussion participants spoke of the need to take personal responsibility for one's own biases, as one pointed out: "Consumers need to be skeptical not only of things we want to debunk, but also to check our own biases when we are quick to believe something." Another suggested, "It is worth regularly asking: when is the last time I changed my mind about something and/or conceded I got something wrong?" And still another said, "I suppose one can only make a personal effort to slay one's own confirmation bias." However, participants acknowledged that "slaying" one's own biases can be difficult, as the bias can subconsciously color how one feels about certain sources of news, giving them more or less credibility based on personal opinion rather than more objective measures of credibility. And for those who are too close to a subject, the question is how to overcome that bias when fact-checking does not work.

"Crap detection" tools.

Being a discerning media user includes being able to evaluate the parts of a news story, from the credibility of the sources to the potential biases of the journalist and/or

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news organization. Participants acknowledge that even trusted news sources with reputations for producing quality journalism can make mistakes, so the individual news consumer must develop a personal crap detector (Rheingold, 2009) that can help balance "skepticism and judgment."

One of the tools most commonly cited in the discussion to use in crap detection is triangulation, or comparing several sources of information to arrive at a consensus on the veracity of a story. Because, as one participant noted, Google is a tool for "finding out crap," there is a critical need to seek out a variety of sources. Triangulating trustworthy sources can sometimes lead to a mainstream view, as major news outlets often use the same framing of news events. One participant shared a particularly strong opinion about the groupthink that can happen among media organizations, "I consider all mainstream media to be sourced from the industry of mass media." Thus, in the triangulation process, participants pointed out the need to seek out regional and international sources for different points of view and more diversity, and to use social media as a place to find new sources.

One participant shared a story of triangulation that worked during a MediaLIT course blogging assignment,

> I found the triangulation [of three articles from different perceived slants] to be
> very powerful … as each of the articles contained similar information, which
> lends them all credibility, yet each of the articles offered at least one perspective
> or point that was unique, which gave me food for thought as a reader.

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Another example of triangulation in action came from international students who commented that they routinely triangulated sources in their home country with international perspectives to see how media from different countries cover world events. Yet another participant described the triangulation process necessary to make sense of the social media news landscape:

It happens to me when I find catchy shared links on Facebook and Twitter. A lot of stories on social networking sites are not from well-known websites. Usually they are just from blogs and news-sites wanna-bes. But when something interests me but I cannot find satisfying information on search engines, I verify from other people (usually my news sources) whether they have any information about it.

Other common tools in participants' crap detection tool kit include reading past the headline so as not to allow clickbait headlines to perpetrate misleading information, following hyperlinks that provide context in stories, and paying particular attention to the data, statistics, and visuals shared in a news story. Participants acknowledge that the biggest deterrent to crap detection is often a lack of time to devote the attention to every piece of media, but that critical issues require in-depth analysis, and research at the individual level is necessary, as one participant put it, because "it's our judgement and urge to gain knowledge which helps in decoding which information is genuine and which is just a hoax." Likewise, another participant commented, "Probably my biggest concern with education coverage in the news relates to the context needed [on the part of consumers] to make good decisions about those aforementioned issues." The tendency for news organizations to focus on breaking news rather than taking a "slow news"

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approach (Gillmor, 2010) to ensure accuracy and provide context makes it more important for individuals to do their own research. Though many participants equate crap detection to common sense, other participants pointed out that a lack of curiosity or impulse to question data, particularly as it relates to science, on the part of the audience can lead to being misinformed.

A common theme that emerged from the discussion categorized as user responsibility is that consumers need to be detectives. The media will present information in various forms, and it is ultimately up to the individual to do personal research to make sense of it. To aid the research process, participants shared their own tools, tips, websites, and other ideas to enhance the capabilities of the group. Many participants emphasized the importance of taking the time to thoroughly vet a story, noting that "[t]ime is needed to really delve into the complexities behind the issues." One participant noted that media literacy principles and critical thinking help people conduct research and make educated judgments about information. With a better understanding of the way the media operate, media consumers can effectively evaluate the common frames and narratives, the "little assumptions that can creep into journalism," that can become standard in certain types of coverage. Left unchecked, media frames can form stereotypes, while the reverse can also occur. Participants recognize that seeking alternative sources can help find information outside the dominant frames. The collective intelligence of the group benefits from the sharing of knowledge and, when applied with a broader audience outside the group, the effects of the knowledge exchange can have even greater impact.

The need to critically analyze data and statistics that appear in news stories came up in discussion several times. Though journalists are responsible for interpreting and explaining data in their reporting, or, as one participant put it, "Journalism's value is to provide the recipients with accurate data," participants argued that it is not enough to rely on journalists to do the job well, but that numbers and data should be reviewed with skepticism. Some participants argued that media consumers are too quick to accept information, in particular science-related information, and that the onus is on the media user to conduct follow-up research using crap detection tools in order to arrive at a more complete picture. One participant commented:

> How did we turn into a society incapable of questioning even the most basic of science concepts, what role do the media play in perpetuating this science blindness, and how do science literacy and media literacy interact in education? Why don't we question things?

Indeed, some conversation indicated that participants were not equipped to analyze statistics. For example, one student writes of a sample size of 2,295, "[Y]ou'd think I'd be happy because the data seem to be in my favor; however, I cannot understand why we happily accept the opinions of 2295 people and extrapolate them to make statements about millions."

Skepticism of media.

The news media has long been plagued by the public's lack of trust in the profession. Though the journalism industry holds itself to certain ethical standards and operates on "the honor system," the abundance of mass media options can make it harder

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for people to know which organizations to trust, resulting in an overall decline in trust for mass media organizations (Swift, 2016). As previously discussed, this view was shared by many participants in the MediaLIT MOOC. However, participants also turned the tables on the topic of skepticism to view it as an opportunity for news users to take individual responsibility for finding news that is accurate and trustworthy. Awareness of the challenges journalists face when trying to produce content to fill a 24-hour news hole, as well as journalists' potential shortcomings related to media framing and explicit or implicit bias, can allow news users to view news with a healthy skepticism and employ the notion of "trust, but verify." Knowing that people rely on journalists to do the research and reporting because the average person does not have the time or expertise to do it, several participants took a view of skepticism as not an end-point, but rather as an impetus for searching for credible information on a particular topic.

Within the context of skepticism, participants discussed a need to analyze each piece of news on its own merit using media literacy tools so as to avoid falling into a general categorization of the media as untrustworthy. As a discussion starter, one participant asked, "What stories do the rest of you have about the first times you doubted the media? If we're to act as facilitators of helping others develop better awareness of media/self-bias, I think sharing our examples could help." The question illustrates several key points prevalent in MOOC discussion. First, the participant acknowledges that it is common to doubt the media's reporting at times. Secondly, the participant addresses the collective responsibility of individuals to act as "facilitators" in the spread of media literacy education by helping others increase their own awareness of media and self-bias.

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Third, simply in pointing out that bias can occur both at the point of sending and the point of receiving illustrates the complex nature of mass media messages. Finally, the request to share personal examples of media mistrust exemplifies the personal nature of media literacy practice and provides a potential framework for how emphasizing one's own missteps with media can empower others to avoid making the same mistakes. In this instance, the participant's question did not elicit any responses from peers; however, others did share their personal examples in their own posts within the discussion.

Though some dismissed crap detection as simply common sense, participants suggested several helpful tools to cut through skepticism. These were brought up on the media side, as well, but when discussion landed on individual responsibility, the focus was on the importance of employing such tools as a way to make the media more credible. As one participant noted, reporting does not always clarify a subject, but can instead stir things up and "make it muddy." In that regard, participants seemed to be saying that the media are as trustworthy as informed news users will allow them to be.

Participants listed an array of tools to help educate oneself on a topic. Ideas ranged from using a combination of social and traditional media to being aware of certain red flags in reporting, such as an overuse of anonymous sources. Others suggested that media users need to ask more questions about news that gets reported and to remember that media messages are contextual and often reflect the cultural lens through which they are reported and consumed. Participants noted that there are often multiple ways to tell a story, but the journalist ultimately gets to decide how to tell it. To that point, one participant states:

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… [T]he public audience is inclined to rely on the main stream [*sic*] media that

will present info in the way we expect to hear it. So if the conservative

mainstream reports on what we want to hear we follow that more. If the liberal

mainstream reports on what we want to hear we follow that more. We make the

agenda compromise. That is the public audience default, aligning ourselves to

hear information that suits the way we think. But at the same time I don't think

we should blindly submit or commit to what the mainstream media puts forth.

Similarly, another participant suggested that "it's easy to fall down a rabbit hole

of a particular world view." To combat that "agenda compromise," participants suggest

that when a news user takes the time to question why a story was told in a certain way it

can get at a possible point of view, agenda or bias.

Though participants acknowledged that using such tools helped increase one's

education, discussion made it clear that there typically is no getting around the time

investment necessary to be a good crap detector. Analyzing multiple sources on the same

story is inherently time consuming and while certain technological tools such as good

source aggregation can alleviate some of that, an individual must see the value in

spending the time to get to the most accurate information. One participant suggested

asking questions at the outset of research to set parameters:

How much do I have to know? How much do I have to know to meaningfully

comment or to behave properly as a responsible citizen (who btw [*sic*] is also

accountable) ...

It can be overwhelming to think about devoting so much time to fact-checking

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journalists, who are professionals trained, and paid, to distribute news information; however, participants note that multitasking or shirking one's own personal responsibility can lead to bad judgment in media use. One participant noted, "Cynicism is the lazy way out. It's easy to simply not believe all the information being received from the media. Becoming good at being skeptical with good judgement, and or media literate, it's something you have to practice [*sic*]." In a reply to this observation, another participant commented,

> one of the challenges, I think, is not to become worn out. It's freeing to accept that there is a great deal of responsibility and agency that everyday consumers now have to check and engage and respond, but the obligation (and requirement) to carry that out is difficult.

Social media's impact on news users.

Just as the ubiquity of social media use has profoundly impacted the way media organizations operate, so has it affected the way media users consume and interact with news. One participant noted that the "Democratization of media has moved people to participate," and enables exposure to a variety of media. Traditional media organizations and social networking platforms are inextricably mixed at this stage, and the act of distributing information is now shared by news organizations and their audience on social networking sites. Conversation about how news shared on social media can be particularly dubious was popular throughout the duration of the course. One participant puts the onus on both the media source and social media users:

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Facebook doesn't create content. People just use it to share. So really the blame is on the original authors of the article and your friends who shared it without questioning it. I use Facebook to share well written and reliable articles all the time. Does that make Facebook more reliable? No. It makes *me* [*emphasis original*] more reliable.

But where technological access makes it easier to form opinions from original source material, the volume of information also clutters and complicates the process. Curating social media feeds is one way for individuals to personalize their news, and it can be a form of media creation when information from those feeds is shared with others within a network. However, at least one participant lamented the decreased impact of traditional media gatekeepers to select what news people see each day: "I miss the serendipity of turning pages and scanning a large amount of stuff I probably wouldn't read by prior selection."

Social media feeds are often comprised of personal connections and other sources of information. One media user's feeds may consist of very media and technology savvy people as well as those whose inexperience or carelessness may impact their usage patterns. Likewise, for some participants different social networks hold different levels of credibility for them, based on who is in their network on each platform. Thus, participants were mixed as to whether they counted their social media "friends" as trusted sources of information. One participant noted, "I seek other spaces and ways to share with my friends, but social networks occupy almost the only [*sic*] to inform and report, I do not want to create or maintain friendships that way." Another asked:

I would love to know what percentage of media consumers would say they get

their news from Facebook or Social Media? I know in many of my circles, the

sharing of stories on Facebook is frequent but they usually fall into the sensational

or 'fear baiting' category. If people were getting their news from a variety of

sources, maybe I wouldn't be seeing so many of these types of stories.

Yet another believes:

The internet has allowed many the fantasy of thinking they are appearing worldly

and intelligent by passing on information they have not themselves vetted,

knowing that in our busy society, no one has much time to call them on it.

On the other hand, other participants see social media as a useful tool for sharing

news, in that it can be used to dig deeper into a story, and as a way to see what people are

talking about and what influences people in a community. Further, there was agreement

that the decision to believe something shared within one's social network is as much the

responsibility of the receiver as it is the sender: "With the array of options available to us,

we as consumers have the choice to accept or reject or simply ignore and move on."

To confuse matters more, there are many people who intentionally share fake

stories. Participants agreed that media users must take responsibility for their actions on

social media, from posting stories to commenting on others' posts or on discussion sites

like Reddit. For instance, one noted that the viral nature of social sharing can be like the

children's game Telephone:

People of good will can be wrong. I trust they do their best. But I know their story, interpretation and perspective are not mine. Let alone the "truth." The remedy is: read as much as you can, listen to as many as you can.

Being educated on how the media operate can liberate users from being influenced, "While mainstream media may have the power to manipulate people, I think people can be smarter not to let themselves be misguided." Given that social media can spread stories "like wildfire," media users must take care to utilize crap detection tools before contributing to the spread.

One participant learned during the course that the decision to share news on social media should be an educated one: "I used to haphazardly share things without making sure I wasn't ruining my reputation as a credible source for information." Of concern to other participants, however, was the belief that young people were not adequately prepared to conduct their own in-depth research outside of Wikipedia.

Another important affordance of social and digital media that has the potential for positive and negative use is the comment function. A student in Chile noted that in his country, "The real public discussion is being held online." However, online comments sections are notorious for their uncivil and antagonistic attitude. As one participant put it, "People have forgotten to listen and respond. Everything is a reaction." Similarly, another suggested, "Arguing online is like arguing with a brick wall, and while [comments sections grow], with people both for and against, it seem[s] impossible to sway anyone's opinion." For at least one participant, the familiar nature of a Facebook feed makes it a reliable place for comments: "The only place I read comments is on my own Facebook,

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and that's entirely people I know, whose opinions I both value and can weigh based on my knowledge of their biases and expertise." Navigating comments through the use of media literacy techniques can help to put them into perspective, but participants acknowledged that it will take a concerted effort on the part of media users to make conversation on the web more "healthy and educated."

Combating information overload.

Much of the information exchange centered on balancing the personal responsibility to use media literacy tools in pursuit of accurate information while being constantly acted upon by a "firehose" of endless media messages. One participant notes:

We talk a lot about 'information' in this course, but I think we're tending to misuse the term, particularly when discussing what our various RSS/Twitter/social media feeds dump on us - all of this is merely raw material, data, or simply STUFF … what matters is what we DO with it to turn it into information.

Another's advice to finding that balance is to own the responsibility without it becoming overwhelming:

One of the challenges, I think, is not to become worn out. It's freeing to accept that there is a great deal of responsibility and agency that us everyday consumers now have to check and engage and respond, but the obligation (and requirement) to carry that out is difficult.

Participants acknowledged that daily news consumption is important to gain "situational awareness" about key issues impacting society. The challenge, then, becomes

making decisions about "when" and "how long" people spend on daily consumption in a saturated media environment. Different sites and platforms often serve different purposes; for instance, one participant described her Facebook timeline as filled with "frivolous and curious" news and her Twitter feed for "social and environmental" news.

To combat information overload, participants exchanged ideas for online information curation and aggregation. Such tools as Twitter lists, TweetDeck, email newsletters, RSS feeds, Google Alerts were described as powerful "listening tools" and as being helpful in finding trustworthy sources that are "consistently accurate, relevant, and customizable" to help cut down the "noise." The tools of curation and aggregation help consumers "gather, order, analyze, critique and distribute information."

Reflecting back on the techniques used for better informed media use learned in the MediaLIT MOOC one participant commented:

> I still feel relatively well-informed, but I have noticed one significant change: I am considerably more reluctant than I used to be to form strong personal opinions. I don't feel like I am being misinformed or misled by my media, but I do feel like getting enough clear information to base an important opinion upon has become more difficult.

Although the course and the discussion focused on digital media, participants pointed out on several occasions that not all information is, in fact, on the Web. This has different implications in various demographic groups: for older participants who are not going online as their younger counterparts, this can leave them increasingly out of the conversation as more news does "happen" online. On the other end of the spectrum,

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participants who worked with young people commented on the fact that younger generations are not learning how to use printed and other analog materials for research purposes. For them, it seems, if it does not exist online, then it simply does not exist.

Interpreting data.

Just as it came up in discussion about media responsibility, participants also acknowledged that they need to have knowledge of how to read and interpret data. Participants point out that data can be skewed by journalists, intentionally and unintentionally, and that in order to triangulate certain types of data, media users might need to go to the source material. In that situation, knowing how to make sense of large amounts of often complex data becomes essential to assessing a story's credibility. And in many instances participants pondered why news users don't question things they learn about from the media. The prevailing feeling seemed to be that professional media have the tools and experience to deliver accurate information, but the public cannot always trust the media are acting accordingly, and thus the onus is ultimately placed on individuals to sort through information on their own. As one participant noted "It pays to segregate what's accurate and what is not." Another described media literacy education that can help people make sense of information as "creating new habits for fact checking a story."

One participant likened media literacy to data literacy:

A statistically literate person should be able to read, understand, and discuss the statistics she encounters in her life. Similarly a media literate person should be able to read, understand, and discuss the various media she encounters. Good

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media are media which have a positive qualitative effect on the lives of its consumers. This may be quite different to media which accumulates page views and shares.

To this point, another participant commented, "Great point! In our push to make the media 'accountable,' all we've really done is make stuff countable."

Participants' learning lessons.

The discussion board was regularly used as a forum to inform by sharing experiences, including cautionary tales to warn of the sometimes-harrowing experience of consuming and using digital media. One particularly descriptive example from a personal experience illustrates the kinds of stories being told throughout the course:

I'm not a journalist but I have misbehaved on social media. Once I found an article that claimed that drinking hot water is good for the health … I posted it on my timeline without giving much thought to it. [Five] minutes after that a doctor I know commented on my post saying this was completely untrue. I immediately republished it and told my friends who have liked and commented on it what the doctor had just told me. After this incident, I had decided to never post health science news, because I've got this feeling that most them are either plain crap or bad science.

The emphasis on conversation during the course provided participants an opportunity to reflect on past experiences and current habits, and to recognize opportunities to take better care in their media use or form new habits. Participants recognize the bias and agenda that are often present in reporting; as one participant

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commented, "I believe people should be as media-savvy as possible -- not to mention engaged with HOW and WHY they use media to influence their decision-making." Similarly, one participant commented on how media literacy education can empower users to make better decisions with the news they consume, "Mainstream media is used as a starting point. Basic information. But active users of media must 'dig a little more' to get closer to the real story. There is almost always an agenda." Yet another suggested looking at the different sides represented in a story and thinking about what has been left out: "Taking in the news is a combination relying on the honor system and gut reflex." Others found the course experience made them more aware of what their own bias brought to their media consumption. Participants also discussed the importance of checking one's own bias. "Too often people like to see 'facts' that make them the victim in a conspiracy. Once cloaked in the mantel of victimhood they then feel free to self-righteously attack those who disagree with them." One participant shared an instance when she was able to check her own bias, "My disagreement was really dressed up ignorance. I wasn't well enough informed on the difference to form an opinion and yet … I'd already done so." Another points to the importance of recognizing others' filter bubbles alongside one's own:

> The concept of the filter bubble is hugely important; what we need to do is have the intellectual and moral honesty to examine our own filter bubbles and how best we can enter, rather than puncture, the bubbles of others.

An awareness and consideration of opposing viewpoints is critical in increasing understanding and finding common ground, because "[p]reaching to the converted

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achieves nothing." Though media are thought to represent a consensus report on a subject, another participant addressed the need to consider context and perception: "We live through our perceptions and truth is a perception that is shared. What is the philosophy of the transmitter? What is the philosophy of the receiver?"

Filter bubbles and echo chambers perpetuated by social networking sites can have a dramatic effect on the type of information people receive. The top stories of the day may be relatively the same across media outlets, but the accompanying narrative may vary widely. A current event that prompted discussion during the MediaLIT MOOC was the Planned Parenthood video exposé, in which the organization's medical director allegedly admits to selling fetal tissue for profit. One participant commented that, "[d]epending on where you heard about the [Planned Parenthood] video and what media outlet sponsored the coverage - you could be exposed to vastly differing editing and information about the video." In this case, as it is with many polarizing issues, the context of the story—and the video itself—changed dramatically depending on the bias or agenda of the entity sharing the information. Versions of the Planned Parenthood story were shared by news organizations across the political spectrum and, as several participants pointed out, were used as propaganda to push an agenda to defund the organization.

Participants' Culminating Observations

In the final week of the MediaLIT MOOC, participants were asked to reflect on the course experience and what they found to be the most compelling takeaways. This discussion was not included in the constant comparative analysis because of its culminating and reflexive purpose; however, the researcher did review the posts for

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common responses in an effort to encapsulate what pieces of the media literacy curriculum most resonated with participants and had the potential to impact gatekeeping practices, and the recommendations they had for improving the course contents and platform. This information is useful for potential future iterations of the course and other practical applications.

Participants mostly named as most personally beneficial and instructive the same topics that were commonly discussed throughout the course. Topics mentioned in reflection blog posts include the need to triangulate multiple sources for more critical media consumption, to engage in crap detection to be one's own editor, to take a "slow news" approach to breaking news, and to be skeptical of the information they consume as an active media user. For example, one participant said:

> I love coined phrases when they're meaningful - astroturfing, filter bubble, echo chamber effect (no wonder I've been chasing my own tail in searches), smart mob, etc. And, of course, crap detection. As a 27-year veteran of the classroom, I've used my crap detector often, but you've expanded its reach when evaluating the facts rained down on me by all the forms of media to which I'm exposed daily.

Participants expressed greater confidence in their ability to take control of their media use, to recognize and challenge their own biases, and the desire to expand their sources of news for a more well-rounded information "diet". An example:

> [T]here is in fact no information overload. There is no more information overload than there is calorie overload at a buffet. You don't need to eat everything you see. But perhaps you need some guidance, discipline & [*sic*] strategies for making

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healthy choices. Learning to consume news in balance is a discipline we never needed before this era of information abundance. And now we are figuring it out.

And in reply to this post, another participant said: "The next challenge is to create a culture around what being 'well-informed' looks like in an era when we absolutely can choose to 'entertain ourselves to death.'"

As was the case in the weekly discussion boards, when participants reflected upon their course experience—in particular, what they perceived to be the most useful takeaways—the overarching theme was that of responsibility. Concepts of civility and respect were repeatedly mentioned in relation to how they plan to interact with media and other media users in online spaces, and most participants who submitted a reflection expressed their intent to utilize the tools, tips, and resources provided by the course team and fellow participants after the course ended. Some suggested they would share what they had learned, including links from the course, with others. Many participants expressed that they would be using the tools and tips gleaned from the course in their professional capacity, either as a journalist or in a media-related field, as an educator, or in a different field. One example that illustrates this point: "I learned a few good tools and resources, which satisfied my expectations. I think a lot of the course content will become more valuable as we enter the full blown Presidential election."

The reflection blog post activity also provided participants an opportunity to share constructive criticism about the course and to offer suggestions to improve the course in the future. The two main critiques related to the U.S.-centric approach to media literacy and to the limitations of the edX course platform.

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Several international participants pointed out that the MediaLIT course was "*very American in its outlook*." Although the international participants recognized that the course was developed by an American university, the fact that "new media exist in a global information landscapes [suggests that] a more inter-/trans-national approach would be sensible." One participant observed that:

> although most participants were non-Americans, the course was very much American focused, as if the rest of the world was a blind spot; there were no experts from outside of the United States and there were no non- American sources.

With regard to edX's MOOC platform, participants mostly found the interface to be visually appealing and easy to navigate, with the exception of the discussion board component. As a prominent feature in the course—as well as the basis for this research—the limitations of the platform appear to have been a barrier to more interactive conversation. One participant noted, "The discussion had a lot of potential, though I found the interface a little cumbersome and disorganized."

Similarly, another commented,

> …I found the edX platform wasn't good for facilitating conversation. I do think being able to set notifications has something to do with this but there's something about using the platform for both submitting assignments and discussion that didn't quite encourage a lot of exchange IMPO [*sic*].

Though the discussion board structure may have inhibited discussion, some participants felt they were still able to engage in some meaningful conversation:

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[It] looks like there were some very interesting discussions happening on here despite the limitations of the edX platform. I appreciate that [the course team] encouraged active participation and debate. At first, it looked like the discussion forum might turn into a series of boring essays and things have really turned around by Week 7.

Participants named technology and a lack of time as the main reasons for opting not to participate in the discussion board. Based on course reflection responses, however, it appears that discussion participation was not essential to enjoyment or completion of the class.

Post-Course Follow-Up Observations

In January 2017—18 months after the MediaLIT MOOC course ended and just before Donald Trump's inauguration—the researcher sent course participants a follow-up survey asking them to comment on how they have applied course concepts in their lives. Thirty-nine participants responded to the survey, the majority of whom indicated that their media use habits had changed since taking the course. Most commonly, participants indicated an increased skepticism about their sources of news and that they more frequently looked to more than one source for accurate information about a story. Survey respondents also expressed that, in general, they have become more critical and conscious of the media they consume. In keeping with the dominant theme of responsibility during the course discussion, post-course survey respondents indicated they had greater confidence in their ability to make good decisions about how they interact with the

media. One example response from the post-course survey illustrates some of the key takeaways of the course:

> I now intentionally, regularly, and consciously, check for recent news from a variety of sources. I am constantly considering media's source, and considering any implicit bias or agenda which may frame the presentation of the media I read, watch, and listen to. The course did a good job of crystallising and making useful my tendency to be suspicious of news media provenance, and also reminded me that I don't have to distrust everything; I just have to try to be conscious in the way I read, watch, and listen.

Though not intentional, that the timing of the MediaLIT course aligned with the first push of media coverage in the 2016 U.S. presidential election proved to be auspicious. Election coverage came up several times during course discussion, and many participants commented that they would—and after the course, did— use what they had learned specifically in relation to the proliferation of "fake news" and misinformation that has become a large part of the daily media and political narrative in the United States and around the world. It is also important to note that several post-course respondents acknowledged the shift in the media landscape during and after the 2016 election as a new contextual frame in which they practice media literacy. For example, one respondent wrote, "I'm glad I took it before the whole US election cycle debacle. I think this course is more important than ever, and more people need to take it."

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

In a media landscape ruled by digital and social technology, the "people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006, n.p.) are active users, even if they are not themselves creating media. Increasingly, through the acts of reacting, commenting, and sharing news information through social media, users are participating in the practice of news information gatekeeping, once exclusively the domain of professional journalists. Gatekeeping practices performed by journalists are informed by professional practices and routines, but the motivations of audience gatekeepers are more varied and less defined. In light of new research supporting the impact audience gatekeeping can have on the spread of misinformation (Silverman, 2016), gatekeeping should be viewed as a practice best informed by principles of media literacy.

The dominant theme that arose from the discussion posts within the MediaLIT MOOC was that of responsibility: the responsibility for media organizations to provide accurate, trustworthy information, and the responsibility for individuals to educate themselves on the media literacy competencies needed to be a conscientious and reliable gatekeeper. In many cases, participants wrote with a sense of urgency about the timeliness of course topics in relation to the news landscape, underscoring the importance of informal educational opportunities for adults to practice media literacy.

The purpose of this dissertation was to develop theory related to how individual media users inform their personal gatekeeping decisions through media literacy practices. The dearth of studies related to adult media literacy has left a hole in our understanding

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of how adults apply media literacy principles outside of the traditional classroom. This line of research is critical, as adults are participating in the news distribution process and their actions can negatively affect the health of the information ecosystem.

This research also examines the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) platform as an egalitarian tool for engaging in media literacy practices. The study aimed to address gaps in media literacy and gatekeeping research by investigating the process by which people share information online, specifically in a MOOC on media literacy. By building upon previous research related to audience gatekeeping and literacy practices, this research bridges a gap between professional and personal practices to develop new understandings about how individual media users can act as responsible and credible gatekeepers of news information. Existing research has described journalism practices like gatekeeping as literacy practices informed by professional norms and routines (Hermida, 2012) but does little to account for the practices that inform non-professional gatekeeping. This research contributes to new models of audience gatekeeping in the 21st-century by calling attention to the outsized influence individuals have on spreading information in the social media realm, and by analyzing how media literacy education can positively contribute to individuals' gatekeeping decisions.

Gatekeeping theory in mass communication has focused mainly on implicit journalism practices that may not be recognized as such by journalism practitioners. Thus, though journalists make gatekeeping decisions every day, they likely do not define them that way. Similarly, audience gatekeeping is a term used to define the process a media user undertakes to decide whether to share a piece of information, but individual

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gatekeepers are not likely to utilize the term to describe what they are doing. Creation may play a part in the audience gatekeeping process, especially as it relates to how individuals can add their own commentary to a social media post before sharing it; however, in this context, gatekeeping is most synonymous with the sharing of news information produced by someone else but can also refer to other common social media engagement practices such as liking and commenting.

As gatekeeping theory has evolved, the role of the audience has increased in significance. Once considered an end-point in the process in a traditional news distribution model, the audience has transformed into an active user base that has easy access to feedback and interaction tools to amplify information as they see fit. Figure 4 depicts an updated model of gatekeeping, based on White's (1964) conceptual model. In the model, S represents story ideas that may become news items after moving through one or more gateways. Professional gates encompass professional journalism norms and routines for reporting and publishing and reflect the traditional process through which news items become full stories distributed by news organizations—a process still in place in the majority of newsrooms. The gateway described as distribution attributes refers to the myriad ways in which news can be distributed across mediums including television, radio, and print news outlets, as well as technology platforms on the web and social media. Different distribution channels have their own attributes that contribute to how media users interact with information; for instance, legacy outlets like print and television do not lend themselves to web and social sharing—though people may still discuss such stories through face-to-face communication—but news shared on social media is easily

amplified by users. The distribution attributes gateway also comprises automated bots that distribute stories (often in an attempt to sow misinformation) and algorithms that use artificial intelligence to impact how stories rise to the attention of web news users. Finally, the audience and public gateway encompasses the ways in which media audiences, as well as other members of the public who do not actively seek news, interact with news stories through acts of liking, commenting, and sharing on social media. As indicated in the model, the audience and public gateway can be activated in an ongoing loop, giving new, continuous, and renewed life to news stories. Further, audience and public gatekeeping practices can result in the production of new stories, in turn re-activating the entire process.

S = Story ideas that may become news items
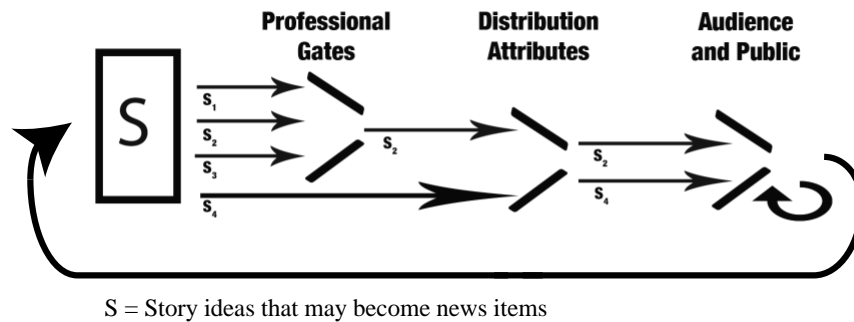
Figure 4. This 21st-century gatekeeping model emphasizes audience participation.

Recent current events have illustrated how great an impact audience gatekeeping can have on certain media narratives (Silverman, 2016). And, unlike in professional gatekeeping, there is no common set of professional norms, practices, and ethical guidelines to advise individuals as they make gatekeeping decisions. In fact, previous research has shown that motivations for sharing information online are not often tied to a

desire to inform or educate (Purcell et al., 2010; Anderson, 2011; Hermida et al., 2012). The negative implications of media users playing a significant role in what information rises to the top of the public consciousness is only now reaching a fever pitch as we see more examples of how that power can be manipulated by algorithms and bad actors.

Media literacy scholars have long argued that it is critical for people to have an understanding of how they are acted upon by media messages, and how they can take control of their own media use. In an increasingly social news environment, users' gatekeeping decisions continue to have greater influence on the public consciousness. As they like, comment, and share specific news items, it is imperative to look closely at the factors influencing such gatekeeping decisions. This research helps to fill the void related to connecting media literacy to gatekeeping as a critical piece of the news dissemination process.

Media literacy has been viewed as a skill that should be "turned on" at an early age to help young people develop a good relationship with media and to ward against harmful effects of media messages (Potter, 2010). Incorporating media literacy into school curriculum for the youngest learners is no doubt important. However, my anecdotal observations in my journalism classroom during the rise of digital and social media has helped align my research with those who use a digital literacies framework and view media literacy as a set of competencies that are practiced over a lifetime. Thus, in a digital literacies framework, media literacy is as important to practice in adulthood as it is in childhood.

This research was conducted in a media literacy MOOC because it provided

several unique observation opportunities to contribute to media literacy research: 1) the course was made up almost entirely of adults, a group largely absent in media literacy research; 2) MOOCs are considered less formal of an educational environment than a typical classroom, so motivations to participate were more varied in that some were seeking completion certificates and others were simply looking to increase their skill level on the course topic; 3) the MediaLIT MOOC was designed in the cMOOC model (Siemens, 2012a; Stephens & Jones, 2014) so as to be a practice-based space to emphasize discussion, reflection, and social learning, an environment that has been found to be particularly conducive for media literacy education (McAuley et al., 2010; Stewart, 2013); and 4) MediaLIT course discussion posts activities approximate social media practices outside the MOOC, thus providing some insight into how participants may extend their media literacy practices in other online environments.

This research aimed to answer three research questions: What literacy practices were identified in the MediaLIT MOOC and how were they defined; what, if any, media literacy themes emerged from media literacy discussions in the MediaLIT MOOC; and is the MOOC an effective platform for teaching media literacy. Analysis of more than 1,200 discussion and blog posts in the MediaLIT MOOC has brought forth patterns and insight to answer the research questions.

Literacy Practices Identified in the MediaLIT MOOC

Street (1998) suggests that because literacy practices explain the larger systems in which literacy takes place, they are enlisted in specific contexts to provide broader understanding of literacy as a social practice. Gee and Hayes (2011) also note that

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literacy is social and contextual, thus we have a better understanding of things we can place in the context of our own lives. The authors argue that literacy is the technology that has freed society from its time and spatial constraints, and digital media is "leveling up" that power in ways never before imagined (p. 21).

Throughout the seven weeks of the MediaLIT MOOC, participants engaged in media literacy practices as a way to make sense of the course materials, to contextualize the course for their personal experience, and to enhance the collective intelligence of the group. Three main literacy practices took shape in the MOOC: 1) discussion and blog posts in which participants demonstrated their understanding of course concepts by providing examples via hyperlinks, images, and other visuals, or by expressing agreement or disagreement with the content taught that week; 2) discussion and blog posts in which participants shared personal examples of decisions surrounding their own media use and placed them in the context of new understanding gleaned from the course; and 3) responses and comments on other people's posts in which participants explained why they agreed or disagreed with the original poster.

The three predominant literacy practices employed in the MOOC likely took shape in response to the course structure and the assignments created by the course team, as is expected in educational environments. Thus, media literacy practices were defined by the routines and norms established by the group as a whole, instructors – including this researcher – and participants alike. Participants rooted much of the discussion in the tools and techniques presented in the weekly lessons, reflecting back and expanding upon course concepts that were informing their media usage. Discussion board prompts

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provided by course instructors provided the opportunity for participants to be reflexive in their media literacy practices. By emphasizing important course concepts but still allowing for conversation to take shape organically, discussion prompts often led participants down a path of self-realization relating to their media use. The media literacy practices detailed below were defined through the researcher's analysis of MOOC discussion activities and the frequency with which they took place. The many moments when participants recognized their own growth illustrate the potential of the MOOC's constructivist learning environment to be a useful tool in the media literacy education arsenal.

Understanding and application of media literacy concepts presented in the MediaLIT MOOC.

The bulk of the discussion taking place in the MediaLIT MOOC served to apply course concepts, a typical construct for instructional discussion boards. From the perspective of the course designers, providing a place for participants to analyze, apply, and evaluate what they had learned in a given week was an integral part of the learning process, as this is where the higher-level critical thinking takes place (Krathwohl, 2002; Hobbs & Frost, 2003). The online and social nature of the course allowed participants to apply what they learned by sharing hyperlinks and images, a practice that also regularly occurs in other online interactions. By providing participants with suggested discussion board topics, the course instructors directed the conversation toward certain key learning takeaways, which undoubtedly impacted the results of the qualitative analysis of major themes found in the discussion. However, the course team also encouraged participants to

choose their own post topics, opening the door for more organic discussion. As a result, it can be argued that the common themes that arose in the discussion reflect those topics that resonated both within the context of the course and the participants' own experience. The personal discussion provides an indication that course learning can be applied in other contexts outside the course, namely in gatekeeping practices within individuals' social networks. Every MOOC participant who completed the post-course follow-up survey answered that they utilized course principles, tips, and tools after the course ended, with most stating they used them regularly. For example, one survey respondent said, "I use what I learned every single day. My job involves managing media (including feature stories, newsletters, social media, and press releases) and I have a much better, more holistic grasp on all of it now."

Many course participants referred to media literacy principles throughout the course as "common sense," though most acknowledged that the common sense is not easily earned and must regularly be tested and refined. For example, one participant commented, "I knew most of the things this course taught before I took it, but then I have been a savvy and very skeptical media consumer for decades. I know most people, even college educated people, are not." Throughout the course, participants shared examples of when they had been tripped up by misinformation and how it has become increasingly difficult to establish an organization's credibility when fake news perpetrators and interest groups have become more technically savvy and unknown algorithms drive page views. A participant wrote in the course reflection:

I realized that media literacy is the kind of knowledge that can benefit anyone.

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And so far, at least amongst my network of friends and family, it feels most people are not aware of all the subtleties involved in navigating digital media. Having a degree in Law and also in Communication, I thought I was well-informed, but this course has showed me that even though I know more than most, I did not know nearly enough, or at least not in a systematized or scientific way.

The act of participating in a course on media literacy is an intentional one; individual reasons vary, but those who participated in MediaLIT were moved to enroll because of a desire to learn, test, and refine how they go about interacting with media. Unlike in a traditional educational environment in which extrinsically motivating factors like fulfilling a degree requirement prompt people to study certain topics, in the MOOC educational environment most participants are motivated by a desire to learn about a particular subject (Stephens & Jones, 2014). Likewise, the MediaLIT MOOC participants are curious, lifelong learners. Though their backgrounds varied widely, because they shared the desire to learn about media literacy, they found common ground quite easily, which reflected in the civility of the discussion and conversation activities. Throughout the entire course, only one or two participants trolled the discussion board, and their actions were swiftly rebuffed by fellow participants, which effectively put an end to it. However, when participants disagreed on a subject, the back-and-forth conversation was respectful and conducted with the intent to find some middle ground. Several participants reflected that connecting with a community of people who have an interest in media literacy was an important part of the course experience. One participant commented,

Long term, I think it's MOST helpful to know that there's a whole COMMUNITY

of concerned digital citizens who want the quality of information to remain high,

and the people who read it to remain knowledgeable/skillful. That means that

answers to questions really are just a well-constructed search away, and that you

CAN have a good online experience with a low troll to citizen ratio [*emphasis*

original].

Discussion of this type is instructive for building similar models in other

educational or affinity spaces. If the positive behaviors can be modeled in other contexts,

there may be positive implications for the spread and subsequent application of media

literacy practices.

Discussion to add to the collective intelligence of the group.

Engaging in literacy practices through discussion and blogging activities appears

to have helped participants identify for themselves the role they want to play in the

collective sharing of information on social media. Both through the posts shared

throughout the course and in reflections about the course, participants modeled

gatekeeping behaviors they intended to adopt after the course concluded. And by

engaging in critical thinking during the discussion process, participants became more

aware of the individual responsibility they have to uphold media literacy principles and

be more intentional in their media use. As one participant put it, "I felt that my

understanding was being stretched and I am now better equipped to look at and use

digital media in a more measure[d] way."

Participants' increased awareness of their own power to either perpetuate

misinformation or to educate others was demonstrated in discussion posts throughout the course and in their personal course reflections. As participants progressed through the course, many commented about the ways in which they intend to use the lessons learned both for themselves and for the greater good. For example, one reflection post stated that, "…learning about Media Literacy made me question things and study them first before I share it to other [*sic*] with my opinion. It pays to know more about the situation, the write-up, or even simply a tweet before jumping to conclusion."

A key takeaway from the MediaLIT MOOC was the feeling of empowerment that the media literacy practices the participants internalized during the course could be applied in other situations. Several participants were moved to become active through a more critical approach to consuming media and even becoming creators themselves. One participant who is an educator commented: "For me, the course has helped me figure out ways to have my students and colleagues reflect on how they are consuming media and how they are producing media." Another, one of the few minors in the group, wrote, "I plan to use the knowledge I acquired here for the rest of my life, being an active producer and consumer of media."

It is an important finding that most participants indicated that their media usage behaviors had changed as a result of the course because it highlights the active nature of media literacy as a set of practices to be utilized throughout one's life. The MediaLIT course placed an emphasis on practice, and, based on the discussion posts throughout the course and comments from completed reflection blog posts and the course follow-up survey, the practice was effective in transferring media literacy principles from the

MOOC to real-world experience. Further, the respectful course environment established by the instructors and participants appears to have resulted in a confidence that practicing media literacy can help build respect and understanding in other contexts, as well. One participant reflected that, "I need to continually remind myself and others that integrity grows from owning your words. I've affirmed my belief that when publishing, I need to reflect on being 'helpful, kind, and specific.'" Another commented that, "I feel bolstered in my own attempts to write about the truth as I see it (and to do the checking to make sure my vision isn't distorted!) and inspired by hearing (and seeing) people who are working to help us all know what we need to know to be the change we seek." In yet another example, a participant commented that, "One of the best long-term benefits of this course would be the spread of its ideas to others (as I believe many of them would make for a better world)."

Discussion to contextualize learning through experience-sharing.

Although most MOOC participants reported that they were frequent media users and expressed a high degree of confidence in their media usage decisions, course discussion revealed a range of understanding and experience. In many cases, participants applied course concepts by detailing personal experiences interacting with media. Some were cautionary tales and others revealed moments, either in the past or during the course, in which they had made bad or good decisions regarding media. Experience-sharing brought an additional element of familiarity and community to the space, as it provided insight into the participants' lives to help find common ground.

Experience-sharing within the MOOC was particularly rich because of the

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international participation; experiences were shared from different global worldviews, engendering new understandings and, at times, revealing fundamental similarities with regard to media principles, responsibilities, and actions across cultures. Participants identified problems that can arise in the journalism process that obfuscate the dissemination of accurate information, and they discussed possible solutions, sharing the techniques they found most empowering for navigating global media, including such practices as triangulation and crap detection. Though the course curriculum was very U.S.-centric, international participants contextualizes their learning to fit their home country's media landscape. One participant from Panama commented that he would like to be contribute to local reporting in his community as a result of the course. Another wrote:

> I am now trying to act more locally and be more active in the local community instead of just fretting about global problems. Where I live we have just lost our local television news service so there is now a need to revive some of our floundering small newsletters - the community discussion of local issues has almost disappeared. This course has encouraged me to start from the grass roots.

Conversation among participants.

The bulk of the discussion activities taking place in the MediaLIT MOOC were single posts that did not elicit a response. The lack of conversation among participants can largely be attributed to the fact that discussion board posts were listed as weekly assignments, and though the course team suggested participants could reply to others to fulfill the assignment, it did not seem to be so clearly stated.

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There were times throughout the course, however, when certain topics spurred a good dialogue between participants. Back-and-forth conversation was particularly spirited and fruitful for topics related to science and health reporting; censorship, propaganda, and media ownership, especially when comparing media and government in different countries and from different geographic points of view; and controversial social issues such as gun control, police shootings, and worldwide elections. Conversation provided the opportunity for participants to exchange perspectives, whether they were based on country of origin, professional experience, or personal beliefs, most of which was conducted in a productive and constructive way. When participants disagreed, they mostly did so respectfully, so as to broaden the experience for all users. Even those few participants who seemed only interested in posting comments to create controversy were met with understanding.

In addition to sharing perspectives, a large portion of the conversation was used to exchange tools and tips participants found useful in their own lives. It is in the information exchanges that the collective intelligence of the group is enhanced.

Limitations to course discussion.

The discussion pattern established by course assignments and technical structure of the MediaLIT MOOC helped to highlight common themes among the post. However, it may have also inhibited conversation because participants felt compelled to share original thoughts on the week's materials instead of commenting on other people's posts to spur more conversation, as discussed earlier. Several participants pointed out that

because of the large volume, many of the discussion and blog posts did not receive any comments. As one participant commented:

I was a bit disappointed in the blogging/discussion forums - I made a big effort at first to comment on other people's threads and to respond thoughtfully in hopes of starting a discussion, but it never took off - I didn't get replies to comments or to my original posts. In that sense, I don't feel like I connected much with others via this course, which is something I was hoping to do.

The edX discussion platform included several features meant to simplify navigation and interaction, including the ability to follow discussions of interest and to upvote certain posts to bring them to the top of the list. However, participants often found the tools to be lacking in their ease-of-use and effectiveness. One participant commented that, "The blogging platform is a little 'clunky' and it made it hard to explorer [*sic*] other contributions." Similarly, another said:

I tried to follow some of the very interesting conversations going on but I always (this happened in other courses too I took in the past) felt overwhelmed by the many interesting things available and after a while decided to give up and concentrate my efforts on getting the assignments done.

Not every participant felt that the MediaLIT discussion board was as fruitful or welcoming to different opinions or disagreement. One participant reflected that:

The most disappointing part for me was the discussions. I was hoping to find more gold nuggets. Maybe it's my own fault for not participating more. But frankly I saw a lot of commentary that I didn't want to react to or comment on. I

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disagreed with people on some things and didn't comment because I really didn't want to get into a discussion with someone who clearly had a point of view and seemed to me not to be open to hearing another side. My experience has been that people react personally to criticism of their ideas even when one takes pains to make the criticism as impersonal as possible. Call me a lurker. Call me a party-pooper. Call me a wall flower. I tried a number of times to get interested and couldn't.

With regard to voting to highlight certain posts, one participant suggested building participation into the course grade: "I do think there is reward in terms of interaction. But most posts didn't get any comments. Perhaps that is something worth trying to build in … participation points for useful (upvoted) comments."

The task of managing a discussion board in a MOOC with several thousand participants is a daunting one. Suggestions from participants about how to modify and enhance the experience in future iterations of this course and in other media literacy courses can be utilized to make technology better serve the learning objectives. Based on the analysis of the discussion as a whole, however, participants' contributions were a vital component to the course, even after accounting for the limitations. Even those who did not participant in the discussions recognized their usefulness, as one participant explained, "I must confess that I have not participated in the forums and discussion boards to the extent I would have liked. This was partly because to write in English is still a challenge to me, partly because I lacked the time."

It is also worth noting that my dual role as instructor and researcher may have had

an impact on discussion. Though I did not actively participate in the discussion because I did not want to influence participants' posts, it is possible that participants took more care in their writing because they knew the content may be used for research purposes. It may is also likely true that the high quality of the discussion can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact it was a learning environment and participants wanted to put forth their best effort and display their intelligence.

Media Literacy Themes Emerging from the Discussion

The coding process revealed nine themes derived from course materials that dominated course discussion. The nine themes were collapsed into two major themes that related to the concept of responsibility—ideas and actions for which individual media users can take control and responsibility, and those for which professional media organizations should have responsibility.

That responsibility should arise from the analysis as the predominant theme may not come as a surprise, as it seems to be a direct answer to the course subtitle "Overcoming Information Overload." Course content and materials served to outline the problem of information overload in terms of qualifying and evaluating the millions of media messages that bombard people each day, while providing some recommendations and solutions for making decisions to manage the deluge. The course suggested that there is no way to stop the media messages, but through critical analysis, users can prioritize the media they pay attention to in order to become better informed. As discussion transpired throughout the course, it became clear that MOOC participants were more aware of the great responsibility that comes not only with media creation but also with

media use. By becoming more active and intentional with their media use, participants were taking more responsibility for the information swirling around them at a breakneck pace. One participant commented:

> I hope that this course has made me more critical and ready to look for multiple sources of information, but I also took on board the need to listen to others' views, even if they conflict with your own. I suspect I will only find out what strategies are best when I am presented with a situation that requires their use.

Media responsibility.

The overarching theme of responsibility emerged in two major ways during the constant comparative analysis process. Responsibility and ownership are integral aspects of effecting change, so it is not surprising that MediaLIT MOOC participants would conclude that professional media organizations and journalists must take responsibility for their actions that contribute to the spread of dis- and misinformation.

Dominant themes found in the discussion that related to media's responsibility for producing and disseminating quality information centered on established journalism practices like reporting breaking news events, the questionable importance of maintaining objectivity when reporting, and best practices for science and health reporting and data analysis. Participants also discussed the influence of ownership in reporting, propaganda messages originating from governments and media organization owners, and the positive and negative impact of social media on news dissemination. By identifying key ways in which journalists can harness their professional tools and expertise to improve the

collective intelligence of the public, MOOC participants place a great deal of responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the media.

The discussion around media's responsibility was often couched in the sentiment that journalists and media organizations need to do more, or do better, in their process of producing and delivering the news. In some cases, participants provided specific examples of how the media can help users be better informed, rather than more informed, as in the way the media report breaking news. In such cases, participants recognized areas for improvement and indicated that their own assessment of media outlets' credibility would be positively impacted by efforts to improve. For example, in the January 2017 course follow-up survey, one participant commented:

I am more conscious of the role of professional journalism and tend to more seriously seek it out. Yes. I am quick with a debunking link these days. … Clearly, events have transpired to buttress the case [the instructor] has made!

Another participant reflected on the experience in relation to current events that transpired following the course:

In the light of the recent US election, and in my own country Brexit, I have been shocked at how easily people have been swayed by biased accounts, how quickly the rules of engagement have changed in favour of opinion over fact, and how ready most of the media has been to acquiesce. Unfortunately it seems the journalistic tradition is under fire from all sides, politically and financially, and [the course team's] efforts to keep the profession honest and relevant are very much appreciated.

Media users' responsibility.

In synthesizing course materials to apply to their everyday lives, MediaLIT MOOC participants gravitated toward certain key concepts that serve to inform their own media use. Themes emerging from this type of discussion throughout the course included how to recognize bias in one's own media use, the importance of being skeptical of media messages, the difficulties of data analysis and interpretation, and the importance of utilizing crap detection techniques and other heuristics and tools for wading through information to come to fact-based conclusions about media messages. These themes were also among the most commonly mentioned during course reflection and follow-up, thus illustrating their long-term relevance.

None of the dominant themes can be employed to promote critical media use without the individual media user first taking responsibility for the role they play in consuming and disseminating information. Moments within the MOOC discussion when media literacy concepts seemed to click with participants were marked by the realization that they had the ability to be their own solution to information overload and misinformation spread. As seen in the discussion, the realization of empowerment occurred in tandem with the acknowledgement of responsibility. Many of the "a-ha" moments were accompanied by a declared intent to take action by changing or adopting a behavior, to utilizing a tool or technique, or sharing what they learned with others outside the course. During the course, several participants noted that they consumed media with a more critical eye and were more aware of their own biases. One participant summarized the gravity of personal responsibility by writing, "Remember that we must stay vigilant

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and never complacent in the way we use media." In her course reflection, another participant commented, "I liked the ethos encouraged in this course that part of being a good digital citizen involves participation with integrity. I wish more people shared this belief."

Eighteen months after the course ended, survey respondents most commonly mentioned that they regularly used the crap detection skills they learned in the course. One respondent commented:

I've now taken to asking questions such as "who does this article benefit", "why is this theme emerging in the news?" and "on the scale of recorded events, does this warrant the airtime being given to it?" So I have become a more cynical person, but also a less gullible one. Which is good!

Surveying the participants 18 months after the course ended provided an opportunity to assess the enduring impact of the course on its participants. Given what transpired in the world between the time the course was offered in July 2015 and the follow-up survey in January 2017, in terms of the rise of the term "fake news" and the increasingly adversarial relationship between President Trump's White House and the media, participant "before and after" responses portray a particularly convincing picture of the critical need for media literacy. Though the media literacy principles learned and practiced during the course were situated in their unique conditions in July 2015, the application of those practices continued to be relevant afterward. As one participant noted in 2017, "The power of fake news and the influence of specific stories on the American

election were especially poignant reminders of how the power of media can be misread and indeed mislead the public to varying extents."

The MOOC as a tool for teaching media literacy education.

How to consume media is not a skill that is necessarily taught. At an early age, most people begin watching television—or, for the younger generations, computers, tablets, and mobile phones—without much thought about the role they play as the receiver of information. Thus, even though many people take advantage of the technology affordances that enable them to engage with media, the act of being an audience is not generally viewed as an act, or a skill needing to be taught, at all. By the time young people are formally exposed to media literacy concepts in school—if they ever are—they are likely to already have deeply entrenched usage habits. Overcoming this challenge and addressing different competency levels warrants a media literacy educational approach that emphasizes practice and application situated within a social learning environment.

Though there may be an unspoken agreement between media organizations, media producers, and media consumers that communication streams are no longer one-way and that audience engagement is an important part of journalism in the 21st-century (de Aguiar & Stearns, 2016), how multi-way communication takes shape in a way that favors factual information and suppresses misinformation remains a mystery or, perhaps more accurately, an afterthought. MediaLIT MOOC discussion would indicate that media literacy competencies are required to increase consumers' awareness of how media operate and how to avoid common pitfalls in evaluating media. In doing so, media users

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are taking greater responsibility for their own actions, with the potential optimal benefit of sharing best practices to collectively develop responsible and active media users. It is not enough to simply invite the audience into the conversation in a social news environment, because many are not equipped to handle that responsibility.

The MediaLIT MOOC models many traditional aspects of formal online college courses, namely that there is a syllabus to guide the learning, and an instructional team provides the content and materials, sets the tone for the space, and determines the educational outcomes and measurement instruments. However, the discussion activities within the MOOC also share attributes with passionate affinity spaces including that fact that all are welcome to be producers, that learning is shared throughout the group and amassed into a sort of collective wisdom, and that the affinity through which people relate to one another is a common endeavor, such as the desire to learn more about media literacy (Gee, 2004, p. 121). Affinity spaces, like MOOCs, can bring together a diverse group of people from around the world who share a common interest but who would likely not otherwise be learning together. While some in the group may be more active than others, all are attuned to certain norms that are established within the space—in this case, norms are established by both the instructors and the participants. The rise of digital media technology and the development of the MOOC as an open and informal learning platform has enabled people to come together across great distances, thereby democratizing learning and creating infinite opportunities. Gee and Hayes (2009) assert that informal learning spaces are competition for traditional schools because they allow for people of different ages and backgrounds to come together and distribute knowledge,

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solve problems, and create while highlighting the 21st-century skills important in today's world but often overlooked in formal school settings (p. 73).

One international MediaLIT participant reflected on how important the open access MOOCs provide is to people in smaller countries around the world:

> The idea that we could access it sitting thousands of miles away and the effort that the university and Dan Gilmore [*sic*] have taken to take these interviews is highly commendable and I thank him with all my heart for this.

Another international participant offered a similar comment on the importance of access:

> But the truth is that you have no idea the tremendous support that courses like this mean in a small country with a long gap in education and technology. I've been I work in the world of communication ten years and I'm about to finish my college career and I've never heard concepts that have been discussed here.

Course reflection in the final week of the MediaLIT MOOC, as well as responses to the follow-up survey in January 2017 indicate that participants gained knowledge and enjoyed the class even without engaging in the weekly discussion boards. Many of the people who took part in the reflection activities drafted very few discussion posts during the course, if any at all. However, their reflections offered specific ways they were using or intended to use the information they gleaned from the course. Thus, as in affinity spaces, lurkers in the MediaLIT MOOC discussion board were able to harness the collective wisdom of the space in much the same way as those who actively participated in the discussion.

MediaLIT participants' discussion posts and reflections indicate that using a cMOOC model that emphasizes and encourages participation was a good fit for teaching media literacy principles. A core tenet of the course is that creation is integral to media literacy; providing students with a weekly opportunity to create their own media meant that course concepts were regularly applied throughout the course, increasing participants' awareness and comfort level with the material each week. The low barrier to entry in MOOC learning mirrors the low barrier to entry to digital media creation, which created a parallel between course learning and post-course application, particularly within social media networks whose structures are analogous to the MOOC discussion boards. Several participants acknowledged the parallel experiences in their course reflections, indicating that they would be applying various competencies and tools they garnered during the course in the future. As an example, one participant commented, "I definitely plan to use my crap detection skills, especially with elections around the corner."

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This research examines media literacy in several important ways that are mostly missing from the research: as an individual gatekeeping practice, in an adult population, and as an informal educational opportunity through a MOOC platform. The research questions addressed the media literacy practices and themes that emerged from edX's MediaLIT MOOC. Findings suggest that media literacy practices that occur within an educational setting reinforce, as well as provide opportunity for the application of, key media literacy competencies within a curriculum. The themes present within the media literacy practices of this particular MOOC indicate that individuals can come to consider

media literacy as a professional and personal responsibility, one that can and should be practiced in other online situations.

There are several limitations to this study that must be addressed. The discussion posts analyzed came from an adult population, which is a novel and important population in the field of media literacy research because it is not typically studied. However, the population studied self-selected to participate in a MOOC about media literacy. The motivation to enroll in such a class indicates a pre-existing interest in the subject; thus, the knowledge, level of engagement, willingness to adopt competencies taught in the course, and satisfaction with the course are inherently higher than one would find in a random sample of the population. This undoubtedly impacted the high level of intellectual and civil discourse and the common perspectives often found in the discussion. Findings cannot be extrapolated to apply to other online or educational situations, and there is no way to know if discussion from the course would yield the same themes of responsibility given a different set of circumstances. Additional homogeneity found within the MediaLIT MOOC participant population, including level of education and profession, also made for exceptionally civil discussion and a lot of agreement. A more diverse group could have produced more antagonistic discussion that resulted in a different experience. The self-selection element may potentially have broader applications, however, when media literacy education is embedded in other learning or affinity spaces in which people actively choose to participate.

A second limitation to the research is that, although MediaLIT MOOC discussion shared many similarities to other forums for online expression, including social networks

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and discussion sites, they are used for different purposes. Therefore, it is unclear whether

MOOC participants would engage in similar media literacy practices outside of the

course. Participant behavior is motived by the learning environment, so it cannot be

assumed that participants would engage in the same practices in a more social setting.

Some participants indicated that their individual gatekeeping practices had changed and

that the course continued to resonate 18 months after it ended, but it was beyond the

scope of this research to observe participants' practices outside of the MOOC.

Though findings from the qualitative analysis of MediaLIT MOOC discussion are

not necessarily translatable to other instances of individual gatekeeping, they do provide

insight about the benefits of using the MOOC platform for media literacy education, as

well as important understanding about the themes and media literacy practices that can

come out of an application-based learning model.

This study also offers several opportunities for possible future research to test

some of the conclusions drawn from the analysis.

The collegial engagement that took place in the MediaLIT MOOC aligns with

Mihailidis and Viotty's (2017) recommendations for repositioning media literacy practice

in connecting humans, facilitating caring, emphasizing participation, and fostering civic

impact. To put these recommendations to test, one suggested area for future research

would be to apply media literacy curriculum to other informal learning spaces that appeal

to some shared humanity and subsequently analyze the media literacy practices within

that space.

Glanz et al. (2017) found that social media interventions that combine factual

information with interactive technologies had the most positive impact on parents' infant-vaccine acceptance. Non-interactive interventions did not prove to be as helpful because parents were susceptible to finding misinformation on the topic during their own information searches. The researchers found the optimal way to deliver factual information included a means for parents to engage in direct conversation with subject matter experts and other parents, although parents in the small trial did not interact as much with other parents. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the MediaLIT MOOC experience in that a combination of vetted, factual information and Web-based discussion opportunities appear to have empowered participants to make informed decisions about their media literacy practices. Similarities can be found between the Web-based intervention structure in the vaccine study and the structure of the MediaLIT MOOC, as well as other interactive online spaces, such as affinity spaces.

Massive Open Online Courses provide free (or inexpensive) access to new educational opportunities; however, the commitment to enrolling in a course may be a deterrent for many. Fortunately, the Web provides myriad opportunities for people to learn and to engage with others who have common interests. The cMOOC model, which emphasizes discussion and application of course principles, worked for MediaLIT because it gave participants the chance to practice what they were learning. But a similar model in a less formal structure could have the potential to bring media literacy education to a broader audience. One idea for future research is to infuse media literacy principles into other online spaces in which people are engaging with media—for which the possibilities are endless. Engaging with users on the popular discussion site Reddit is one

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possible example. Reddit is divided into thousands of niche sub-groups, or subreddits, which are communities in which users share common interests and can take part in establishing norms for the group through actions such as up- or downvoting posts to gain or minimize visibility. Halavais (2013) notes that "[r]esearch in publics outside of institutionalized contexts thrives when there is a strong feeling of good will, shared purpose, and trust" (n.p.). The most successful subreddits have established norms and expectations that help establish trust within the community (Halavais, 2013; Roschke, 2014). As of December 2017, there was one subreddit devoted to media literacy, which contained four posts, the last of which was posted 10 months prior. A number of items including the term "news literacy" have also been posted to various subreddits, including "r/politics" and "r/edtech." This could be a good space to test if media literacy education can be introduced and practiced in informal learning spaces online, with the intent of incorporating media literacy education across online spaces to give people—especially adults outside of the education environment—more opportunities to learn and practice media literacy.

Other online spaces characterized by a shared interest or passion, including those that contain some or all of the characteristics of a passionate affinity space (Gee & Hayes, 2012), have the potential to be effective venues for sharing credible information and strengthening media literacy practices. For example, in a study of online parenting sites, Suárez-Perdomo et al. (2018) suggest that professionals disseminating content related to parenting work to develop ethical and quality standards for online content and play a part in helping parents develop their own skills to assess credibility for themselves. Similarly,

in a study of massively multiplayer online games, Steinkuehler (2008) calls for educators to "seek out ways to build *bridging third spaces*" between traditional academic environments and less formal educational spaces.

Participants in the MediaLIT MOOC found the discussion board platform within edX to be limiting in terms of facilitating fruitful discussion. In their course reflections, several participants shared that they did not participate in discussion as much or at all because the forum was difficult to navigate. Tweaks by the course team for the discussion assignments and a more robust platform to foster back-and-forth conversation with features for adding visibility to popular comments could improve the quality of the conversation. Developing another iteration of the course that enabled greater discussion would provide another opportunity to analyze media literacy practices with an emphasis on participant interaction and such interactive practices as sharing hyperlinks and other visual media. Such an improved forum could more closely simulate participants' gatekeeping practices in other online spaces.

Though nearly 150 countries were represented in the enrollment, the course was very U.S.-centric, to the disappointment of the international participants. Future iterations of this course and others like it should reflect a more global view of the complexities of media and media literacy to encourage further participation and deeper understanding.

Another area for possible future research would be to continue to follow MOOC participants throughout the course and post-course as they go about their "real-world" gatekeeping practices. Observing participants in their own element would provide additional insight into the impact of media literacy education on individual gatekeeping

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practices and would allow for measurement of growth in terms of their actual gatekeeping practices outside of the learning environment.

Finally, the current research only took a qualitative look at the MediaLIT MOOC, to assess participants' media literacy practices. However, there were several other instructional benchmarks within the course to mark participants' progress, including weekly quizzes, and a pre- and post-survey. Future research on media literacy education on the MOOC platform could take a mixed-methods approach to observe not only the qualitative practices of the participants, but also to quantitatively analyze participant learning. This would give a more complete picture of how participants are engaging with course material.

Implications for the Diffusion of Media Literacy Practices

Although media literacy is always relevant in our media-saturated society, the MediaLIT MOOC proved to be particularly timely. Participants embarked on the learning journey just as Donald Trump was declaring his presidential candidacy. A portion of the discussion within the course analyzed the media surrounding his campaign, and it is eye-opening to frame the comments through a lens of hindsight. The events that transpired in the U.S. and beyond between July 2015 and January 2017 provided many opportunities for participants to apply what they learned during the MediaLIT course, and when given the opportunity to reflect back in a survey, most respondents carried forward the theme of responsibility that had dominated in-course discussion. Most respondents indicated they felt more in control of their media use. For instance, one respondent wrote:

Yes, I am using the principles, tips, tools and course materials from MediaLIT on

edx.org. All this helps me to sort through media content, verify sources of

information and check the writings, especially shared on social media. I think that

media literacy is important [*sic*] issue in a time of consuming news through social

media. It is important that we double check before any retweet posts, or content

particularly related to news including images of those committed violent acts, or

terrorism attacks.

The majority of respondents felt increasingly empowered in their ability to make

good decisions about what media to use, trust, and share. Thus, they were moved to take

responsibility for their own gatekeeping decisions. Whether respondents were more

inclined to share media literacy tips or to correct others in their social networks when

they shared misinformation was more mixed, however. Among those who felt

responsible for spreading good information, the U.S. election, Brexit, and other major

world events provided a catalyst for sharing what they had learned in the course. One

respondent wrote, "Yes -- I have shared some of the how-to-oriented resources with

several people and I had ample opportunities during the recent U.S. election cycle to

objectively and respectfully ask others to share credible sources supporting their post

perspectives."

Another example from a respondent who was moved to share what she had

learned with others in her social network:

 I fact check everything, especially after all the fake news this year. I'm also more

comfortable navigating some of the media sites. Although I'm always polite when

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I respond to questions, I'm amazed at the people who feel free to shame, blame, or simply harass other writers. Privacy is important and I constantly monitor security and privacy when I visit a site. I think perhaps some of the politicians should have taken the media course before they began to talk or release information about other candidates. Especially during the political campaign dump of information and misinformation, I checked and double checked before I even thought of making a statement about something I'd read. I view tweets made by everyone - well known or not- as suspect unless I can attain their veracity.

More common in the post-course responses was a sentiment that when armed with the necessary knowledge and tools, individuals can work as part of a system of fact-checkers to weed out bad information and increase the collective intelligence of their social networks. One example of this:

I became much more aware of my role. Now, if I read something I make a quick check of the credibility of the source and share it only if I think my audience will find it useful. I avoid as much as possible to be emotional when dealing with information.

A key takeaway from the course reflections is that the majority of participants felt the course had benefited them and would continue to serve them in their future media use. Those who reflected in January 2017 on the course experience noted that the rise of "fake news," hyper-partisan "news", and bots spreading misinformation have made them value the course and the importance of media literacy even more. One participant wrote,

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"This course seems to be increasingly important. I hope that MediaLIT grows as a discipline to equip people to apply discernment when consuming media." Another said:

> … Hands down, the MediaLIT course has been the most influential thing in my life in the past 17 months. This is possibly due to the timing with election coverage, but it changed the way I view everything, not just media. I ask more and better questions about everything, and am able to view all media with a more nuanced, critical eye. Thank you for making this important and excellent content available through edX.

In reflecting on the responsibility the media have in the health of the news ecosystem—a theme that dominated course discussion—participants indicated they had better insight into the process, which helped them to assess trust and credibility and in turn make them better media users. As one respondent noted, "Dan did an awesome job of introducing the role of a journalist. Something I had never considered and actually took for granted. So, that alone was worth taking the course."

Another post-course respondent wrote:

> … I think I am better at turning off the firehose - or at least limiting my focus to more credible news sources and resisting the distraction of misleading content creators. One of my most enduring takeaways was the importance of investing in good journalism as a counter to all the BS.

Discussion and feedback from MediaLIT participants throughout the experience illuminate the lasting positive effects of media literacy education developed in a cMOOC model for a mass audience. Providing space for learners to discuss course concepts with

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others reinforced the learning objectives and enhanced the learning as participants connected it to their own experience. Media literacy practices are analogous to professional journalists' gatekeeping practices in that they serve to explain, contextualize, and apply judgment to media use. With knowledge of good media literacy principles, individuals' gatekeeping practices become better informed, and may more closely approximate those of professional journalists. There is evidence from MediaLIT post-course reflections that the learning was readily applied to contexts outside of the course, and that predominant themes of responsibility in media use and creation that emerged within course discussion transcended the confines of the MOOC. The result is a group of better-informed gatekeepers who have the potential, and in some cases have indicated the desire, to help spread good social sharing practices. Given the lack of media literacy education opportunities for adults, this research indicates that MOOC courses could fill the gap and provide a widely available, easily accessible forum in which to learn and practice media literacy.

That the dominant themes in the discussion relate to responsibility emphasizes a need for action with regard to media literacy education: action in the teaching, action in the learning, action in the process of journalism, and action outside of traditional learning environments. Media literacy cannot simply be viewed as a way for individuals to change their own isolated interaction with media. Media literacy is now a fully social construct, thus media literacy curriculum should incorporate the gatekeeping and sharing practices alongside the principles for individual consumption and analysis. Social news sharing is a form of informational gatekeeping, and thus in itself a form of informal learning and

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teaching. The findings in this research come at a critical time in the evolution of our complex digital information ecosystems, as the viral spread of mis- and disinformation has led to a credibility crisis exacerbating all-time low levels of public trust in the media. The responsibility theme indicates a clear need to develop solutions across disciplines that equip stakeholders throughout the gatekeeping process to actively contribute to improving the public's media literacy. In the current hyper-partisan and polarizing media climate, it is imperative to find ways to embed media literacy education within people's regular online use to improve the collective intelligence of our democratic society.

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APPENDIX A

TRANSCRIPT OF RESARCH INVITATION IN MEDIALIT MOOC

"Hi, everyone. I'm here to invite you to take part in a pre-course survey, which will provide us with valuable information for research on media literacy education. The survey is a set of questions drawn from media and literacy studies and will take about 25 minutes to complete. Why is this important? Because it gives us a better understanding of who you are as a group, both in terms of certain demographic variables such as where you live and your age, and as a baseline media literacy measure to start the course. At the end of the course we will ask you to complete a similar post-course survey to help us assess how media literacy competencies and skills were developed throughout the course. Your responses will be anonymous and any information used for research purposes will be in aggregate form and not tied to any personally identifiable information. Your participation in the pre- and post-course surveys is voluntary and not related to your final grade. If you choose not to participate or withdraw from the study at any time there will be no penalty. You have the right not to answer any question and to stop participation at any time. In addition to the surveys, data collected from the course will include a random representative sample of participants' discussion board posts and responses to peer assessment and open-ended quiz responses. Other data that may be analyzed as part of this study includes quiz results, grades on individual assignments and final course grades, course completion rates, and your time spent within the edX platform. This information will be provided to the research team in compliance with edX's research and privacy policies. For more information or if you have questions, please read the text that

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accompanies this video. You may begin the pre-course survey by clicking on the link below. Thank you for your time."

Link to Introduction to Research video in edX course:

https://courses.edx.org/courses/course-v1:ASUx+MCO425x+2T2015/courseware/4d138e80f80f4bbca08fa69b1a4e06df/3e2aba44ed134e5cbf3029536cc1e62d/?child=last

APPENDIX B

LIST OF MEDIALIT MOOC DISCUSSION BOARD AND BLOG ASSIGNMENTS

Week 1:

Please choose one or more of the topics below to share your thoughts and respond to others in the Week 1 Conversation forum:

1. Do you trust what you see in the "mainstream" (traditional) media? If so, why? If not, why not? Or is it some combination. For things you might mistrust, what's a good example? Provide links where applicable. (Note: Next week we'll dig much more into this topic, but we thought it would be interesting to hear your thoughts at the start.)

2. Do you have any questions or comments about the week's lectures or materials?

3. Share questions for the course team about the Week 1 assignments here.

Week 1 Blog Post

How do you use media in your everyday life? We'd like you to track your use of media -- your consumption and creation -- over the next 24 hours and write a discussion forum post sharing your behavior patterns. What you find may surprise you.

Media consumption includes everything from watching television for news or entertainment, listening to the radio or podcasts and reading newspapers/books/magazines to time spent online and on social media. It doesn't mean, for our purposes, things like email and voice/video calls.

Media creation means what you write or post to your social media sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Tumblr, Instagram, Google+, SnapChat, WhatsApp, etc.); blog posts; reviews at sites like Yelp, Amazon and TripAdvisor; and other activities

where more than one person can see what you've done. Again, this will exclude most email and voice/video calls.

Here's what we suggest:

- Use a pen or pencil. Really.

- Don't be obsessive, but collect as much detail as you can as regularly as you can. (See Dan's example post, which we've linked to here: MediaLIT: My Media Use) You might want to make this an hourly activity, or a running tally.

- For each entry, please include things such as the device you used, media content consumed (this would include the source of the media and the topic(s)), and media content created/shared.

- Add up the time you've spent on each kind of media.

- Post your findings on the 24 Hours of Media Blog Post (just below this window in the course).

In the end, we would like you to have an understanding of where you are consuming your media -- including approximately how much time is spent on the different types of consumption -- and how much you're creating it.

Follow the link to Dan's example post here: MediaLIT: My Media Use

Week 2:

We've really enjoyed the conversation that has taken place in the discussion forum so far. For Week 2, we encourage you to read through the discussion threads already started and consider replying to one of those before starting your own thread, so that we can foster more active discussion among participants.

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Please choose one or more of the topics below for this week's conversation.

1. Almost everyone, including your instructors, has been fooled -- at least temporarily -- by a hoax. If this has happened to you, describe what happened and how you discovered you had been fooled. Did this affect your trust in any participant (including the news organization or other source of the information)? Please include hyperlinks where applicable.

2. In your reading this week, author David Weinberger says transparency is "the new objectivity." Do you agree with him? If so, why? If not, why not?

3. Feel free to continue to read and respond to Week 1 discussions.

4. Share questions for the course team about the Week 2 activities here.

You'll recall from our "Before the Course Begins" section that you will become a media critic. This week, you'll get started.

Week 2 Blog Post

Pick a topic that you know a lot about and are passionate about -- and which you follow carefully in the media (traditional, social, all kinds). Whatever it is, make sure it's something that has a following in media beyond Facebook and Twitter.

Once you've settled on a topic, write a short post in the Week 2 blogging forum describing it and why you care about it, and then how you feel, in a general way, about how it's covered in various media. Provide relevant hyperlinks where applicable. The post should be 300-500 words.

Week 3:

The conversation in the discussion forum continues to be thoughtful and engaging. For Week 3, we again encourage you to read through the discussion threads already started and consider replying to one of those before starting your own thread, so that we can foster more active discussion among participants.

Please choose one or more of the topics below for this week's conversation.

1. Thinking about Howard Rheingold's lecture on crap detection, which of his suggestions do you regularly use when evaluating content on the web? Which of his suggestions were new to you?

2. Do you think the growing popularity of native advertising is a problem in digital media? Have you been confused by content that appeared to be journalism but was really sponsored content? Please provide links to examples of native advertising you have encountered where applicable.

3. Describe your own trust meter. What news sources have gained (or lost) your trust and why? Provide links to sources or specific examples to help illustrate your points where applicable.

4. What is your process for fact checking when reading news online? Provides examples of recent news content you thought needed a more thorough fact check if applicable.

Week 3 Blog Post

Your blog post assignment this week is to go deeper into the topic you have chosen and share some specific examples of media coverage -- good/bad,

accurate/inaccurate. As part of your post, you should describe the coverage (the examples you choose), and talk about where they fail or succeed to meet media creation standards based on the concepts you have learned so far in the course.

In your blog post, you should include at least two media examples about your topic, including footnotes for each example. We ask you to use footnotes (a little bit retro) instead of embedded links. The Peer Assessment assignment is limited to a fairly plain-text submission (interesting challenge for us all).

The post should be 300-500 words and should be posted here in the Week 3 Blog Post forum, and then copied into the peer assessment tool (we will include a peer assessment video for support).

As part of the Peer Assessment assignment your post will be reviewed by two of your peers. In return, you will also evaluate two peers' responses.

Course concepts covered that you might include in your post:

Week 1:

- A Brief History of Media

- It's Messy Out There

- Media Consumption Principles

- What is Media and News Literacy?

Week 2:

- Being Skeptical

- Using Judgment

- The Two-Sides Fallacy

- Science and Stats

Week 3:

- Howard Rheingold on Crap Detection

- Advocacy versus Propaganda and Advertising

- Asking Your Own Questions

Week 4:

Week 4 Conversation

The conversation in the discussion forum continues to be thoughtful and engaging. For Week 4, we again encourage you to read through the discussion threads already started and consider replying to one of those before starting your own thread, so that we can foster more active discussion among participants.

Please choose one or more of the topics below for this week's conversation.

1. What sources do you access for alternative viewpoints? Include links to sources here.

2. Do your social media feeds represent a wide variety of viewpoints? Provide examples.

3. What do you think about filter bubbles? Do you think the information you seek is subject to this phenomenon?

Week 4 Blog Post

Your blog post assignment this week is to use your "crap detection" skills to expose misinformation related to your blog topic.

In your blog post, you should include at least two media examples of incorrect or misleading information about your blog topic, including links for each example, and describe the tools and process you used to conduct your own crap detection.

The post should be 300-500 words and should be posted here in the Week 4 Blog Post forum.

Week 5:

Week 5 Conversation

We continue to be impressed by the breadth and depth of the weekly conversations. For Week 5, we want to focus our conversation on the tools and tips you have for using and creating media.

- Do you have experience blogging or creating videos? Share your tips for successful creation here.

- How do you manage information overload? What curation and aggregation tools do you use to stay informed without becoming overwhelmed?

Week 5 Blog Post

Your blog post assignment this week is to become a curator of sources on your blog topic. You will compile a list of expert sources that cover your topic, with the goal of providing a valuable resource for people new to the subject who want to learn more.

This list can include a selection of Twitter users to follow, links to online sources and anything else you think will make it a robust collection.

In your blog post, you will share your curated list with a brief description of why you made your selections. Your list should include 5-10 sources. The post should be 300-500 words and should be posted here in the Week 5 Blog Post forum.

Week 6:

Week 6 Blog Post

You have two choices for your blog post assignment this week. Please choose one of the following (or you're welcome to do both!):

<u>**Blog Post Topic Choice #1**</u>

Write a letter to a person or group of people in your life (this could be a friend, family member, children, students, etc.) explaining one or more key concepts from the course and why you want them to know more about it. The purpose of this assignment is to put into use some of what you have learned here by sharing your knowledge with someone (or some people) close to you.

Your assignment should be 300-500 words in length and should include at least 2-3 relevant hyperlinks to resources and examples that help explain your position.

- OR-

<u>**Blog Post Topic Choice #2**</u>

Write a one-page mini-lesson plan explaining a key concept from the course. In the space of one-page (as in a typical document), you will teach one key concept using definitions, links, examples and perhaps a quick student activity. We've included a sample lesson plan below (under the link to the discussion forum) for your reference.

In the spirit of our open course platform, we encourage you to make these lesson plans available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial license](#) so that other participants may use the ideas in their own teaching.

The lesson plan should be no longer than one page in length and should include at least 3-4 relevant hyperlinks to resources and examples that help illustrate your concept.

Your final assignment should be posted here in the Week 6 Blog Post forum.

Week 6 Conversation

For Week 6, please answer one or more of the following questions by either starting a new discussion thread or replying to a discussion already in progress.

- Do you think comment sections on blogs and media websites are important? Why or why not?

- What community guidelines do you think are most important for online communities?

- What good and/or bad examples have you seen of community guidelines for online communities?

Week 7:

Week 7 Course Reflection Blog Post

For your final blog post of the course, we would like you to look back on your experience here to help us gain a better understanding of what worked, and what didn't. Though you are free to share any thoughts on the course, comments about the course content and community-building learning activities (discussion, blog posts, peer assessment) are most helpful to the course team.

Some specific thoughts to consider:

- What were your expectations for the course? Did the course meet your expectations?

- Was the course content beneficial in helping you take control of your media usage? Why or why not?

- What parts of the course did you find most beneficial (lectures, readings, interviews, discussion, etc.)?

- How will you use the course information in your daily life moving forward?

- What information or strategies from the course will be the most helpful longterm?

As you know, this was our first time teaching a course of this scope and, as with any learning opportunity, we experienced some growing pains. We deeply appreciate your feedback and observations on the content and design of the course so that we can improve. Our partner edX also deeply appreciates your views about elements of the platform that you liked or that challenged you. Their work in the field of open teaching and learning is a tremendous service. There is a discussion thread in the course called "edX Platform Wishlist" at the link below; in addition to your Blog Post, please use this space as a place to provide feedback for edX and we will share it with them in a course debrief.

Visit the discussion thread at the link that follows here: edX Platform Wishlist

APPENDIX C

LIST OF CATEGORIES AND THEMES FROM QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

OF MEDIALIT MOOC DISCUSSION

Complete list of categories during round 1 of qualitative analysis

Media Responsibility

Conflicting information in the media

Typical media frames/narratives

Two sides fallacy

Health/science reporting - shallow, incorrect, misleading

Media coverage lacks depth

Objectivity/Transparency

Data literacy

Skepticism

Anonymous sources

Clickbait headlines

Viral hoaxes/satire

Science reporting/fear

Misinformation

"Noise"/overload

Facebook as a tool to find out what people are talking about

Individual Responsibility

Science literacy - why don't people question things

Readers need to make good decisions

Need multiple sources

Student bias in blog posts

International Points of View

Trust

Confirmation bias/backfire effect

Triangulation

<u>Final Themes</u>

Media Responsibility

- Social media impact on news

- Two-sides fallacy/reporting shortcomings

- Clickbait and lack of depth in reporting

- Science/health reporting and fear

- Media ownership and profit

Individual Responsibility

- Overload/curation/aggregation

- Be skeptical/media frames and agenda/propaganda

- Social media impact on news

- Confirmation bias/backfire effect

APPENDIX D

SCREENSHOTS OF EDX DISCUSSION BOARD INTERFACE

1) Discussion board landing page

2) Example of a discussion thread with post and reply

3) edX post editor interface
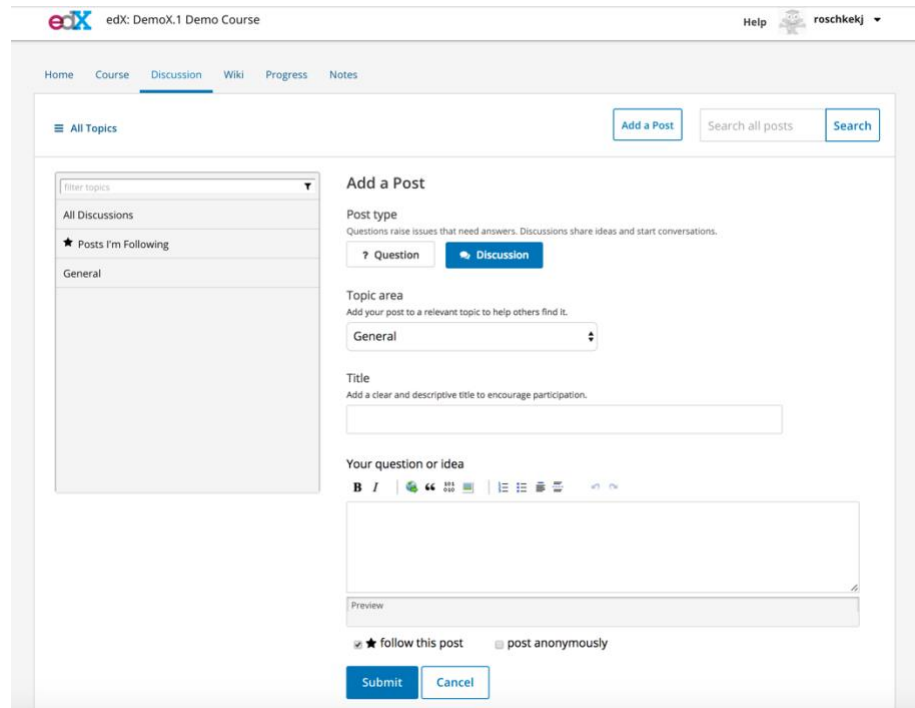
4) Screen for inserting hyperlink into post
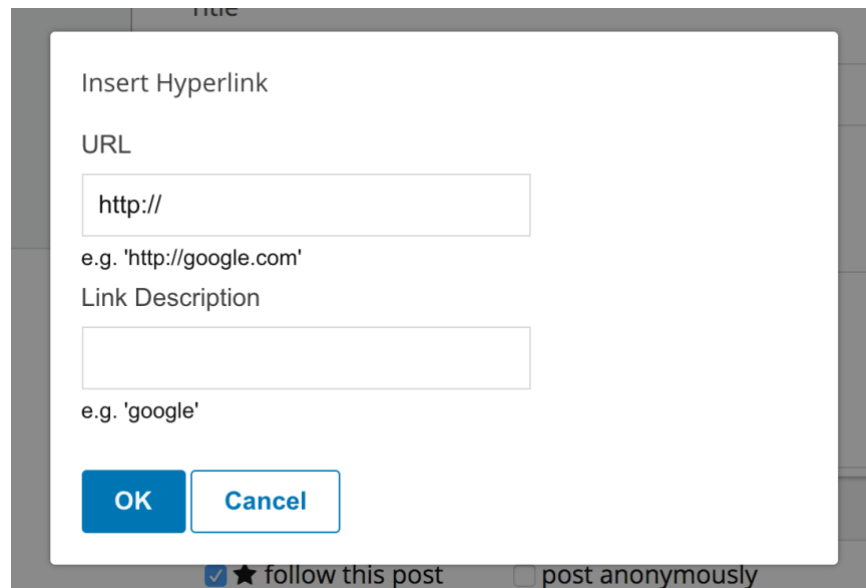
5) Example of following a post

Why I don't agree that transparency "is the new" objectivity

discussion posted 2 years ago by ▓▓▓▓

Follow ★

In your reading this week, author David Weinberger says transparency is "the new objectivity."
Do you agree with him? If so, why? If not, why not? I believe not. Here is a link to a you tube
video that the new objectivity, transparency, would need remodeled for the attainment of
abundance we are warring for. https://www.youtube.com/watch?
v=WKLcetZ97DI&feature=iv&src_vid=-twZDMe8tYI&annotation_id=annotation_2232451679
As well, new workings by "The Internet of Things" clear away needing transparency as they
provide it without question. I think there should be another new objectivity as I believe we have
already reached transparency.

Related to: Week 2 Conversation / Week 2 Conversation
This post is visible to everyone.

Add a Response   3 responses

APPENDIX E

List of MediaLIT MOOC Participants' Home Countries

Student Count	Country Name
2456	United States of America
361	India
269	UNKNOWN
238	Canada
223	United Kingdom
152	Germany
147	Australia
140	Brazil
129	South Korea
123	China
103	France
88	Spain
87	Philippines
86	Russia
83	Japan
82	Ukraine
77	Mexico
73	Pakistan
72	Netherlands
70	Italy
62	Nigeria
56	Hong Kong
55	Indonesia
55	Vietnam
53	Turkey
50	Romania
49	Singapore
48	Greece
43	Belgium
43	Poland
43	South Africa
41	Taiwan
40	Egypt
36	Sweden
32	Malaysia
28	Switzerland
28	Colombia
28	Portugal
27	Thailand
26	United Arab Emirates
26	Argentina
26	Israel
24	Austria
24	Czechia
22	Finland
22	Ghana
21	Ireland
21	Morocco
21	New Zealand

Student Count	Country Name
21	Peru
21	Serbia
20	Saudi Arabia
18	Hungary
17	Chile
17	Sri Lanka
16	Denmark
16	Norway
14	Bangladesh
14	Estonia
14	Kenya
14	Lithuania
13	Bulgaria
12	Algeria
12	Lebanon
12	Uganda
11	Bosnia and Herzegovina
11	Georgia
11	Croatia
10	Slovenia
10	Slovakia
9	Belarus
9	Latvia
8	Armenia
8	Ecuador
8	Venezuela
7	Iran
7	Nepal
7	Puerto Rico
7	El Salvador
7	Tunisia
6	Costa Rica
6	Kuwait
6	Mongolia
6	Zimbabwe
5	Bolivia
5	Dominican Republic
5	Jordan
5	Qatar
4	Albania
4	Cameroon
4	Haiti
4	Macao
4	Mauritius
4	Palestine, State of
4	Syria
4	Trinidad and Tobago
4	Tanzania
4	Uruguay
4	Uzbekistan

Student Count	Country Name
3	Botswana
3	Ethiopia
3	Jamaica
3	Kyrgyzstan
3	Macedonia
3	Myanmar
3	Malawi
3	Namibia
3	Rwanda
3	Sudan
2	Azerbaijan
2	Bhutan
2	Cyprus
2	Guatemala
2	Honduras
2	Iceland
2	Kazakhstan
2	Libya
2	Malta
2	Panama
2	Paraguay
2	Somalia
2	Swaziland
2	Zambia
1	Antigua and Barbuda
1	Anguilla
1	Angola
1	Burkina Faso
1	Bahrain
1	Bahamas
1	Congo
1	Côte d'Ivoire
1	Micronesia (Federated States of)
1	Equatorial Guinea
1	Jersey
1	Cayman Islands
1	Liberia
1	Lesotho
1	Luxembourg
1	Montenegro
1	Madagascar
1	Maldives
1	New Caledonia
1	Nicaragua
1	Oman
1	Réunion
1	Senegal
1	Suriname
1	South Sudan