Chapter 18

Media Literacy for Political Cognition in Higher Education: A Solution-Centered Approach

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ABSTRACT

Civic education has long been a goal of liberal education, and many institutions are renewing their commitment to meaningful civic engagement as both a philosophical and educational goal of higher education. Civic engagement and media literacy are essential to fostering democracy. This chapter outlines the shared ideological and pedagogical approaches to civic and political engagement and its connection to media literacy education. The 2016 election cycle has presented a number of challenges for civic engagement and media literacy educators. Many of the core values and beliefs related to critical thinking and information literacy have been challenged.

INTRODUCTION

Media literacy and civic engagement in higher education share the same education philosophy stemming from John Dewey’s concept of “liberal education,” or liberal arts curriculum. This is foundational to the way in which American institutions of higher education approach teaching and learning. The basic concept of liberal arts is the connection between lived experience, expert knowledge, and critical thinking. Media literacy education is centered upon interplay between media and information, experience, and critical thinking (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Dewey (2008) argues that liberal education is necessary for democracy to function properly. Media and information literacy education fosters the skills and motivation for further student civic engagement (Martens & Hobbs, 2015) In both contexts, the central argument is that the masses can be manipulated, through media and through politics, to act against their best interests. To counteract this manipulation, colleges and universities must teach people to critical think about their lived experiences and foster skills that enable them to see through manipulation, or, at the very least, be aware of manipulation.

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Although there is clear philosophical justification for media literacy and civic engagement in higher education, there are numerous barriers to this education as well. In this chapter, the author argues that there is an information crisis that challenges the very foundation of media literacy and civic education. While there is still some debate into Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, it is clear that powerful actors attempted to manipulate the outcome of the election through traditional and social media (Demirjian, 2017). This manipulation should concern both media literacy and civic engagement practitioners. Beyond Russian influence, the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election was one of the most divisive is recent memory (Balz, 2016). “More so than in some past campaigns, however, the effect of all this seems to be accentuating the gap between left and right, between Democrats and Republicans, between elites and the rest of the population” (Balz, 2016, para. 8). Higher education institutions have always mediated between individuals and society; however, in time of crisis and division this mediation is critical to better both individuals and society (Maguire, 1982).

This chapter explores the underlining philosophical foundations of media literacy and civic engagement in higher education and suggest a pedological approach that considers the current political climate. Specifically, this chapter outlines the current “post-truth” political environment and its implications for media literacy and civic engagement; then conceptualizes civic engagement and media literacy pedagogy; and then discusses how the media influences civic engagement, knowledge, and politics.

THE INFORMATION CRISIS IN A POST-TRUTH ERA

The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election cycle has presented several challenges for anyone who deals with facts and information. Whether it be a journalist, scientist, or teacher, many of the core values and beliefs related to critical thinking and information literacy have been challenged. For those in higher education who focus upon civic and political engagement, the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election cycle have been difficult because it challenges the basic tenets of civic engagement pedagogy: political neutrality/objectivity, rational decision making, and information/media literacy. The news media has struggled to cover Donald Trump’s campaign and presidency due to its disregard for facts (Noah, 2016). During the primary, Politico tracked the statement of both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump for five days, Trump averaged one falsehood or lie every three minutes and 15 seconds, which was about four times as many false statements as Clinton (Cheney, Arnsdorf, Lippman, Strauss, & Griffiths, 2016). According to Politifact (2017), out of 460 fact checked statement, 5% were deemed true, 12% were mostly true, 15% were half true, 21% were mostly false, 33% were false, 15% were extremely false or “pants on fire.” Following the 2016 election, Trevor Noah, host of The Daily Show, articulated the central problem with the Trump presidency, “historically, every politician the news has ever dealt with, […] have one thing in common, in some way, shape, or form they all use facts. Even if they lie, politician’s lies are based on facts. Until Donald Trump, this is how politicians lied, that is why fact shaming worked.” What Noah (2016) is arguing with Donald Trump, do not waste energy disproving the claims that cannot be proven, claims that were uttered without any intention of factual accuracy, claims that support an alternative narrative that is based in an ideological reality, not a factual reality. Facts matter, but how the news media uses facts needed to be reconsidered (Noah, 2016). While Trevor Noah is speaking specific to the news media, “fact shaming” or fact checking is a failing of the political Left, the scientist, and the university instructor. Lakoff (2014) argues that progressives (liberals) have always believed that proving a statement is a lie or is disproved by factual evidence is enough to dissuade people from supporting a political
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argument; however, that is only one avenue of persuasion, it is more complicated than that. Politicians lie, misinform, and spin, but it is up to the “expert” to point out the accuracy of politician’s claims and let the public draw their own conclusions is the liberal theory of politics, for better or worse (Jackson & Jamieson, 2007; Whelan, 2017).

The work of John Dewey is foundational not only to American liberal education but also to civic and political engagement (Saltmarsh, 2011). Liberal education refers to education philosophy, not to political ideology (i.e. liberal vs. conservative). Liberal education helps students to “develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings” (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2017, para. 1). Woolard (2017) found that every perspective of civic education in the modern civic education movement, starts with Dewey as guide philosophy and ideological frame. Dewey (2008) argues that effective education is necessary for democracy to work, citizens must be well educated and able to make effective decisions. Liberal education has always been connected to civic and political engagement (Moon, 1991). Colleges and universities provides a space where expert knowledge can be made available to non-specialists that can inform public discourse and debate (Moon, 1991). Moon (1991) notes that the cultivation of practical judgment as part of liberal education, is problematic because in the process of practical judgement, one finds that there are right and wrong answers—all positions deserve a fair hearing, but some are wrong. In relation to civic and political engagement pedagogy, Moon (1991) argues that instructors are hesitant to call out positions that are wrong, “it is easier to practice the democratic virtues of tolerance, compromise, and respect for others (including their opinions) if we abandon the view that there are right or wrong answers to the questions we face” (p. 200). To approach topics in a neutral or objective fashion, university instructors can simply ignore the political implications of their course (Hess, 2009). In many ways, those in higher education want to talk about student civic and political engagement without being hindered by the real consequences of politics. In higher education, civic engagement “efforts are often pursued as ends in themselves, and engagement becomes reduced to a public relations function of making known what the campus is doing in and/or for the community and providing opportunities for students to have experiences in the community” (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011, p. 18). As Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) explain, “[w]hat has emerged on many campuses are remarkably apolitical “civic” engagement efforts” (p. 19). While many in higher education advocate more of a commitment to civic education, it is nevertheless a great challenge to achieve effective civic and political engagement in the current historical and political situation.

Many journalists and commentators have adopted the term “post-truth” to describe the current political climate. In fact, Oxford Dictionary (2016) named “post-truth” as the 2016 word of the year, noting that it was a term that was frequently searched, indicating it has become mainstream. Post-truth is 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” (Oxford Dictionary, 2016, para. 1). The term stems from Keyes (2004), he argues that there has been a cultural shift regarding deception. People have always lied, but lying has become more mainstream—to the point that people can compartmentalize deception as separate from their own ethos (character). “Even if we do tell more lies than ever, no one wants to be considered a liar” (Keyes, 2004, p. 13). To avoid being labeled a liar, Keyes (2004) notes, “[w]e no longer tell lies. Instead we ‘misspeak.’ We ‘exaggerate.’ We ‘exercise poor judgment.’ ‘Mistakes were made,’ we say. The term ‘deceive’ gives way to the more playful ‘spin.’ At worst, say-
ing ‘I wasn’t truthful’ sounds better than I lied” (p. 13). The result of this cultural shift is people have become suspicious and skeptical of everything, even sources that are objectively credible. “When lying becomes too prevalent, and liars too skilled, even those who tell the truth are subject to the assumption that they aren’t” (p. 215). This is the reason why people reject clear and legitimate evidence related to climate change, vaccine effectiveness and safety, voter fraud, and immigration. “The real danger is not that we won’t develop the necessary skepticism about lies and apocrypha but that, once we do, we will discount legitimate information” (p. 215). Suiter (2016) insists that post-truth politics can be seen in the rise of populism globally, from Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders to Brexit—all stem from a growing skepticism of established political parties and experts.

Nichols (2017) argues that the influence of “experts” has diminished significantly, not that experts are disappearing, but that their expertise carries less weight in people’s decisions. Nichols (2017) attributes the “death of experts” to the increased access to more information through the Internet. The Internet is a vast sea of information, some of it is credible, some of it is not. The issue is not that people do not conduct their own research; it is they view themselves as experts because they have access to information. People feel that they can do a Google search, consult WebMD, or watch a YouTube tutorial and that makes them an expert on anything and everything in a matter of minutes. The paradox of media and information literacy is people have been trained to do their own research—the technical skills of accessing information—but they have not been trained to evaluate the information and source credibility. With a sea of information, it is also easier to fall into a political echo chamber, making one’s recognition of confirmation bias more difficult. If one encounters numerous sources of information that reinforce their political positions, they may feel that they are information literate; when it could simply be that their search engine has sorted search, results based upon the user’s previous searches, and the person simply did not look beyond the first few search result pages. When one has literally millions of results in their search engine, who could blame them? People trust their search engine and manipulation of those search results can alter people’s behavior and attitudes related to consumer habits and politics (Epstein & Robertson, 2015).

Nichols (2017) argues that higher education is partly to blame for the death of expertise because of the effect of neoliberalism on higher education. Since students are viewed as consumers or clients, rather than students, they are told that the customer is always right. “Younger people, barely out of high school, are pandered to both materially and intellectually, reinforcing some of the worst tendencies in students who have not yet learned the self-discipline that once was essential to the pursuit of higher education” (p. 72). At one point, very few people attended college, but with increased access, college has become a mass experience. Liberal education is supposed to train students to become critical thinkers—the skills for them to become experts. Nichols (2017) argues that higher education is supposed to elevate expertise; however, it has done “just the opposite, the great number of people who have been in or near a college think of themselves as the educated peers of even the most accomplished scholars and experts” (p. 70).

In addition to growing skepticism and post-truth politics, American politics has become more divisive and less civil (Zompetti, 2015). People are less willing to discuss politics with people who do not share their own beliefs and tend to demonize, regardless of political affiliation, people who hold different opinions than their own. Eagan et al. (2017) found that incoming first year students are entering higher education more politically polarized than previous cohorts.

Civic and political engagement is important, perhaps more now than in previous years, but it is also challenging given the current political climate and crisis of information (Zompetti, 2015). This chapter
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is divided into three sections: conceptualizing civic engagement and media literacy; the influence of media on civic engagement, knowledge, and politics; and developing a civic engagement and media literacy pedagogy in the classroom.

CONCEPTUALIZING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND MEDIA LITERACY

Civic engagement and media literacy share the same origins in liberal education and both are concerned with student motivation and intellectual development—critical thinking and good judgment. Civic engagement is concerned with not only fostering students to think critically, but to act in their own communities in various ways. Media literacy is also concerned with fostering critical thinking, but in many ways, is not explicitly concerned with students’ political action. This is not to say that media literacy cannot be used to foster civic engagement, but that civic engagement must be deliberate in media literacy education (Dahlgren, 2009).

Civic Engagement as an Intellectual Movement

Civic engagement has long been a goal of higher education, in fact, the Founding Fathers of the United States all believed that public education was necessary for democracy to work—uneducated masses could be easily manipulated and misled; however, they disagreed what that education should look like and who should be educated. Thomas Jefferson envisioned an educational system that would train the public (through common schools) and the republican elite (through colleges and universities) to participate in a republican democracy (Hellenbrand, 1990). It should be noted that women and minorities were excluded from these political activities for centuries. The American education system, with its educational tiers, stems from this basic concept. Throughout the United States’ history, civic education has always been a guiding principle (Jacoby, 2009).

As an intellectual movement, civic education has undergone many iterations, the most recent began in the 1960s and 1970s with service learning (Jacoby, 2009). Although all civic education shares the same ideological origins in John Dewey and liberal education, there are multiple terms and concepts that are used—to the point that it can be overwhelming to research (Woolard, 2017). Woolard (2017) identify seven frames or perspectives on civic education in the modern intellectual movement: service learning, civic engagement, political engagement, democratic engagement, critical engagement, social justice, and anti-foundational perspective. Each perspective has its strengths and weaknesses, but in relation to media literacy, civic and political engagement are perhaps the most relevant.

Civic engagement is defined as “acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one’s communities. This includes a wide range of activities, including developing civic sensitivity, participation in building civil society, and benefiting the common good. […] Civic engagement involves one or more of the following: Learning from others, self, and environment to develop informed perspectives on social issues; Valuing diversity and building bridges across difference; Behaving, and working through controversy, with civility; Taking an active role in the political process; Participating actively in public life, public problem solving, and community service; Assuming leadership and membership roles in organizations; Developing empathy, ethics, values, and sense of social responsibility; Promoting social justice locally and globally. (Jacoby, 2009, p. 9)
As is evident in Jacoby (2009) definition, civic engagement encompasses many different types of activities, and is the most commonly used term in the civic education movement (Woolard, 2017).

Political engagement shares some of the same ideas as civic engagement; in fact, many scholars use the terms interchangeably. However, Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, and Corngold (2007) argue that, political and civic engagement, are each distinct concepts. Political engagement includes direct participation in electoral politics, such as “voting, participating in campaigns or political parties, contacting elected officials, running for office, and the like” (p. 29). Beyond the traditional understanding of political participation, Colby et al. (2007) argue that:

*political participation can include working informally with others to solve a community problem; serving in many types of neighborhood organizations and groups that have a stake in political policies or outcomes; supporting political causes or candidates financially; participating in public forums on social issues; discussing political issues with family and friends or trying to influence coworkers’ political opinions; working on a campaign for a candidate or issue; writing letters or politically oriented electronic journals (blogs); signing petitions and participating in various forms of policy advocacy and lobbying; raising public awareness about social issues or mobilizing others to get involved or take action through rallies, protests, sit-ins, street theater, or public awareness campaigns; participating in collective consumer efforts intended to achieve political goals, such as purchasing or boycotting particular products or making investment decisions in support of social-political causes; and of course, voting in local or national elections or perhaps even running for public office. (pp. 30-31)*

As Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) note, in practice, many civic engagement efforts have become apolitical—they can be reduced to volunteerism without advocating political participation. People can be civically engaged through volunteering and community engagement, but not participate in any form of government activity (i.e. voting) or interact with any political system. Sander and Putnam (2010) argue that volunteerism is on the rise, but at the same time, political participation is still low. To put this into perspective, in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, just about 55% of eligible voter cast a ballot, the lowest voter turnout rate in 20 years (Wallace, 2016).

**Civic and Political Engagement as a Pedagogy**

There are numerous approaches to civic and political engagement; however, this chapter will focus upon the civic learning spiral and approaching controversial political issues in the classroom, both can help to facilitate civic and political engagement.

Musil (2009) conceptualizes the civic learning spiral into six elements: self, communities and cultures, knowledge, skills, values, and public action. Media literacy is connected to each of these elements. Musil (2009) outlines six learning outcomes for each element:

*1* We all learn and live within an intricate web of interdependencies that are with us from childhood to old age; *2* Being a learner and being a responsible citizen are continuous, lifelong, and intricately dependent upon cultivating and recognizing relationships; *3* At the heart of education for civic engagement is the notion of the self in ongoing relationship with others; *4* Civic engagement is dependent upon collaborative inquiry, dialogic pluralism, and negotiated collective action; *5* Civic engagement needs to be informed by knowledge, rooted in values, tied to democratic aspirations, and embodied through
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practice; [6] Given that U.S. democracy is marked as much by its failures as its aspirations, engagement in such a context implies both a promise and an undertaking. (p. 61)

Musil (2009) provides a more in-depth breakdown of these learning objectives, including assessment; however, the learning objectives related to knowledge and skills are applicable to media literacy. Musil (2009) notes that knowledge is dynamic, socially constructed, and reflects power; and that skills require effective critical thinking.

Given the current political climate and the divisiveness of political discourse (Zompetti, 2015; Eagan et al., 2017) it is naïve to believe that one can avoid controversy when fostering civic and political engagement. For some people, particularly conservatives, the fact that civic and political engagement is discussed in higher education is proof enough of political indoctrination. Teaching controversial issues in the classroom is challenging, but the benefits greatly outweigh the challenge. Democracy is full of controversy and competing perspectives and to effectively teach students to navigate actual discourse, it is necessary to engage these issues in the classroom. Hess (2004) highlights the difficulty of teaching controversial issues:

Because public opinion can shift over time, selecting subjects for issue discussions can be like shooting at a moving target. […] It is far easier to teach about an issue when there is widespread agreement in the general public than when there is conflict about whether an issue is really an issue. But there is often disagreement about what constitutes a legitimate issue for discussion. (p. 258)

Discussing controversy is necessary, because today’s controversial issue can become tomorrow’s reality. The classroom provides a unique microcosm of diversity. While there are many other locations where controversial issues are discussed, such as places of worship, family homes, and social clubs; these places tend to be homogeneous in perspectives, values, and creeds. However, the classroom has the potential to be very diverse (Hess, 2009).

There are numerous reasons why controversial issues should be incorporated into the classroom. It promotes democratic thinking and civic engagement (Andrzejewski, 1995; Clarke, 2005; Hess, 2009; Hunt, Simonds, & Simonds, 2007). Also, there is a strong connection between discussion of controversial issues and critical thinking skills (Andrzejewski, 1995; Clarke, 2005; Freire, 2010; Hess, 2004; Hunt et al., 2007). Hess (2009) also argues that, there needs to be discussion of controversial issues in education to help curb the general lack of civic engagement in society. While Americans tend to love conflict in sports, and television, there is a great distain for discussion and conflict about controversial issues, which are much more important sites of conflict.

If we are to educate our students for responsible citizenship, we and they can’t steer clear of controversy. Liberal education and the values of the academy are all about the need to seek and consider alternative conceptions, stances, and views and to consider them respectfully” (Ehrlich & Colby, 2004, p. 36).

Most would agree that civic engagement should focus upon teaching students to engage in controversy in a civil way, it can be difficult to do. Ehrlich and Colby (2004) notes that incorporating controversy on a college campus can be difficult regardless of political ideology; “unfortunately, in most settings, people with strong political opinions talk almost exclusively to those who agree with them” (p. 36). To address the challenges of incorporating controversial issues in the classroom it is necessary to discuss a
pedagogical paradigm and its relationship to teaching controversial issues, then move to some techniques and strategies to incorporate controversial issues into discussion.

Before discussing how to teach controversial issues, it is important to develop a paradigm in which to teach. Hess (2009) identifies numerous dangers associated with controversial issues including charges of indoctrination. Clarke (2005) notes that teaching controversial issues is challenging because the issues are complex, and teachers feel that they are not “experts.” While these are legitimate concerns, that seem to be without answers, developing an effective paradigm helps to circumvent these issues. Teachers need to critically evaluate how they themselves view their relationship with their students.

Paulo Freire (2010) argues that the way that education is structured does not facilitate true learning and critical thinking. Narrative education, or the “banking” model as Freire (2010) describes it, is void of discussion. The teacher is the sole source of knowledge, and the students have no knowledge, no experience that is useful in the education process. The student’s job is to be “filled” with the knowledge of the teacher. This concept becomes problematic when attempting to teach controversial issues. If the teacher is simply narrating the issues, they can easily be charged with indoctrination. Also, as Clarke (2005) notes, a teacher who may feel the need to be an “expert” on complex controversial issues to effectively “teach” may reflect this banking concept as well, negating what students may know, or be able to learn, about a controversial issue. Many of these issues are connected to narrative education.

Freire (2010) offers an alternate educational paradigm, which he calls “problem-posing” education. He argues that “[t]hrough dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers” (p. 80). What Freire argues is that that both “teachers” and “students” should both teach and learn through discussion. The teacher and the student are not the experts, but they may have expertise on a subject. “They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (Freire, 2010, p. 80).

Adopting a problem-posing paradigm can alleviate some of the pressure on teachers. They do not need to be an expert, but rather, can learn with the students. At the same time, students need to learn and be able to teach as well. Freire (2010) argues that students develop critical thinking skills, and a sense of commitment. Hess (2009) also notes that effective teaching that incorporates controversial issues yields similar student outcomes.

Hess (2004) identifies four approaches that teachers tend to take regarding incorporating controversial issues into curriculum: denial, privilege, avoidance, and balance. Denial refers to teachers who treat controversial issues as having a single “correct” answer and therefore the issue is not controversial at all. The second approach is privilege, where teachers acknowledges multiple perspectives; however, privilege their own opinions above other perspectives. Avoidance refers to teachers who simply avoid controversial issues altogether—they tend to feel they have such strong opinions to teach “objectively.” Balance refers to teachers who acknowledge that an issue is controversial and attempt to incorporate multiple perspectives without privileging perspectives over others. Hess (2004) notes these teachers tend to present an objective standard for evaluation for perspectives, but leave the evaluation up to students. The goal for teacher should be to expose students to multiple perspectives and promote open inquiry. In many ways, each of these techniques reflects the narrative or banking concept of education. In each instance, teachers hold the knowledge; the question is a matter of how they narrate, not whether they do or do not narrate. Hess (2009) argues that most common argument against incorporating controversial issues is that teachers will indoctrinate student; however, adopting the problem-posing model of education, indoctrination is difficult because students are learning the skills to deconstruct doctrine.
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While Freire (2010) is arguing for an entirely different form of education, where teachers and students have equal power and education is concerned with the ending of oppression, adopting a problem-posing paradigm helps to set up effective discussion of controversial issues that facilitates open dialogue and critical thinking.

Given the contested nature of controversial issues, and the fact that most people would rather avoid controversial issues altogether, it is important to foster an open communication environment (Andrzejewski, 1995; Campbell, 2008; Ehrlich & Jacoby, 2009; Hess, 2004, 2009). Students need to feel comfortable to talk about these issues. There is need for mutual respect. Andrzejewski (1995) argues that, there needs to be ground rules established early in the class that should include honest and respective dialogue and expectations for outcomes. From a persuasion perspective, seeking agreement and commitment on rules also insures that students (and teachers) will follow those rules (Cialdini, 2001). Andrzejewski (1995) also notes that it is important to talk about students’ self-interest and their own personal integrity. It is important for students to identify their personal beliefs and motivations. She argues that students need to understand their place in dominant systems (both in terms of privilege and oppression). As Freire (2010) argues, it is important that students understand their role in society.

Clarke (2005) offers a useful framework for understanding and analyzing controversial issues. The “de-mystification” strategy contains four parts: 1) What is the issue about? 2) What are the arguments? 3) What is assumed? 4) How are the arguments manipulated? While this seems simple, students need to be able to effectively find information on a subject, evaluate that information, and identify what may be left out or manipulated. Andrzejewski (1995) states it is extremely important to look at multiple sources of information, including scholarly resources and news media. Once again, finding this information can be overwhelming if the teacher takes it upon themselves to find and “narrate” this information.

With controversial issues, it is inevitable that students with expound ill-informed opinions, challenge information, and become upset with the comments of others. Teachers may feel the need to interject comments and opinions if they feel that the discussion is going the “wrong way.” Research suggests when instructors are abusive and over aggressive they decrease effective learning (Mottet, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006). However, Mottet, Richmond, and McCroskey (2006), note that aggressive communication can have both positive and negative effects on student learning. They identify four general forms of aggressive behavior: assertiveness, argumentativeness, hostility, and verbal aggression. Assertiveness refers to the tendency for teachers to dominate the conversation and in general is positive. Teachers should effectively keep students on track, which requires assertiveness. Argumentativeness refers to the “predisposition to defend one’s position on a controversial issue while simultaneously attempting to refute another person’s position” (p. 75). Under most circumstances, students view this positively and enhances teacher credibility. In fact, this behavior helps students to model desirable behavior regarding critical thinking. Hostility and verbal aggressiveness (i.e. threatening and attacking behavior in regard to student’s self-concept) are associated negative effects on learning. Students feel resentment when teachers threaten and attack them as individuals. The key distinction in the focused upon argument rather than people—when there is mutual respect for people and an interrogation of ideas, aggressive communication is very helpful. It is a good idea to challenge students’ positions, for them to critically evaluate their own assumptions.

In an age of unprecedented cynicism towards politics it is important to realize the role that communication and education plays in creating and shaping the future. Teaching controversial issues is not a comfortable enterprise for teachers and students; however, this discomfort is not an excuse for avoidance.
Teachers need to reconsider their relationship to student to teach controversial issues to promote civic engagement and some strategies and techniques that can help to facilitate effective discussion. Freire (2010) leaves us with a caution, although many have adopted his pedagogy regarding education, very few have understood his true intention. It is not a method of education, but rather a new way to think about what education should and can be. While it may seem difficult to teach controversial issues, it is nevertheless important, not only to student development, but also the development of democracy.

**Media Literacy**

The philosophical foundations of media literacy are based on the fundamental elements of a liberal arts curriculum—critical thinking. As Hobbs and Jensen (2009) explain, the foundation of media literacy education stems from a critical understanding of one’s experience with the world, including mediated experience. Starting in the 1950s, media literacy was promoted as a way to teach students about media and culture. “Some saw this as a way to raise children’s standards of taste and quality while others saw this as a means to protect children from the distracting influences of Hollywood by teaching them to understand how the cinema worked” (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009, p. 2).

Media research has always been aware of the dangers of mass media; however, Hobbs and Jensen (2009) argue, “[t]oday, we face new and even more polished promotional propaganda from the digital culture industries who encourage both educators and students to acquire and use new media tools, but do not place a premium on critical engagement with media’s changing forms and content and its impact on lifestyles, social norms, and values” (p. 5). Today, media literacy education is more needed than previously because of the dominant role media continues to play in modern life. “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” (Adams & Hamm, 2001, p. 33).

Video media, starting with film, has been around for over a century, and since the invention of the medium, it has been seen as a great technology to aid in learning (Orgeron, Orgeron, & Streible, 2012). All media in the classroom are built upon a simple principle of multimedia in aiding teaching and learning.

*The multimedia principle states that people learn better from words and pictures than from words alone. […] Cognitive theory derived from these findings posits interactions between three stages of memory—sensory, working, and long term—that are connected by cooperative, additive channels used to process information arriving from different sensory modalities. (Fletcher & Tobias, 2005, p. 117)*

This principle has almost been universally accepted as an underlying theory of education—that it is always a good idea to present information in different ways; including the use of text, images, audio, video, and live performance.

The debate continues whether media can replace the teacher; however, as Schramm (1977) argues, this sort of questions really oversimplify and ignore the complex relationship between media and learning. As Marsh (2009) explains, “[t]echnological developments have led, over the past three or four decades, to significant changes in the ways in which we communicate and undertake daily tasks involving the reading, writing and creation of texts” (p. 28). Most students are well versed in technology (although many do not critically think about its role) and see this new media as vast learning tools. Logan (2010) explains that “new” media blurs the line between producers and consumers of information—anyone with a few basic technological tools can create media, post it on the web, and receive feedback. The advent of
do-it-yourself (DIY) content has vastly changed the role of media. New media has created a climate of continuous learning, where almost any information can be easily accessed and used at any time (Logan, 2010). The impact of this digital revolution on the lives of young children is rarely considered, yet they are as engaged in the social practices. “[I]t is vital that educational institutions respond to these wider social and cultural changes in order that they offer children opportunities to develop skills, knowledge and understanding, which will be of value in the new knowledge economy” (Marsh, 2009, p. 28).

**Media Effects of Entertainment**

At first glance, education and entertainment would seem to be on opposite ends of the spectrum. Most people have experienced a sense of dread at going to school. “It is so boring,” and “I do not want to be here, I would prefer to be hanging out with my friends or watching TV” are common reactions to compulsory education. Culturally, we tend to distance what is monitory and stressful—school or work—from what is voluntary and relaxing—entertainment; however, when one is talking about the use of video and entertainment in the classroom these distinction loses some of its meaning. As Schramm (1977) notes, entertainment and instructional medium all rely upon the same technology. Successful teachers, regardless of their use of media, entertain students in some way, and entertainment is a ubiquitous aspect of any culture, although what is considered “entertainment” can vary. For most people, entertainment plays a major role in our daily lives, especially given the unprecedented access many people have—it is on our televisions, computer screens, mobile telephones, tablet computers; it is on the TVs at our places of work, business, and schools.

What does entertainment do? For one, “[e]ntertaining fare can produce considerable excitement in respondents. Such excitement manifests itself in obtrusive sympathetic dominance in the autonomic nervous system, among other things, and it produces intense affective reactions” (Bryant & Miron, 2002, p. 561). To put it simply, entertainment creates an emotional response, although depending on the person, this can be viewed positively or negatively by respondents. Entertainment choice is a matter of personal taste, but we also use entertainment to regulate our level of excitement (Bryant & Miron, 2001). Children as young as four and five use media as a method to improve mood and regulate excitement. Humor and comedy may be able to counteract exposure to boring or dry material (Bryant & Miron, 2001). As a case-in-point, politics is generally seen as boring—important—but boring by most people; however, bring out the humorous and satirically aspects of politics may help improve students positive affect towards political discussions (Dahlgren, 2009; Jones, 2010).

While maintaining a desired level of excitement is one function of entertainment, enjoyment and satisfaction also play a major role in entertainment. “Entertaining messages are capable of gratifying respondents because of unique intrinsic properties, along with the respondents’ idiosyncratic appraisals of these properties” (Bryant & Miron, 2002, p. 567). One variable that is the most influential within entertainment is conflict (Bryant & Miron, 2002). Conflict and its resolution is not just an element of drama or athletic competition, Gruner (1997) argues that it is the basis of humor as well, the main difference with humor it the suddenness of the resolution, and the surprise of who wins. Laughter is a physiological response that marks the relief of stress—in the case of humor, the setup of a joke or a funny situation builds tension and stress; the punch line or climax results in stress relief.

Now that we have discussed the general effects of entertainment media, we now move specifically to the effect of video media in the classroom.
Media Effects of Video Media

Technology and education has always had a close relationship. As society moves and evolves technologically, there is a need for education to train others to use this new technology. Also, from a business standpoint, education has always been a good market—providing many opportunities for companies to sell their wares to a larger audience. Film is a good example; since the technology was created it has been pushed upon education (Orgeron et al., 2012). What does video do in the classroom?

Video media can present more information, in a limited amount of time, than most methods of instruction. Combined with skilled instructors, video offers many benefits in education. Video instruction can also provide students with experts who can provide better instruction or perspective on a variety of topics. “For example, it may be used in content areas outside the expertise of local teachers, […] to offer surrogates for experiences that are otherwise difficult to achieve or are dangerous, and to offer a reusable form of instruction that may be conveniently used when desired” (Wetzel, Radtke, & Stern, 1994, p. 3). This particular point is also relevant in relation to humor in the classroom. We know that video media can bring in great scientists and experts, why not great comedians? The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, has been praised as excellent, entertaining political satire (Baym, 2005; Pew Research Center, 2008; Self, 2011; Xenos & Becker, 2009). One of the most significant issues with the use of humor in the classroom is that the teacher must be comfortable and talented enough to use it (Banas et al., 2011; Mottet et al., 2006; Wanzer, Frymier, Wojtaszczyk, & Smith, 2006). With the unprecedented access to humorous video media provided by the Internet, why not bring in the comedy experts into the classroom? Video in the classroom has been a widely-accepted medium of instruction. Beyond the classroom, streaming media has changed the way in which we watch media and gather information (Johnston & Bloom, 2010). While there is still debate as to the media effects of entertainment and video, Bryant and Miron (2002) provides insight into another aspect of media effects, the wellbeing of the audience. We use media and media provides many benefits; however, all the effects of media consumption are not desirable, which needs to be explored thorough media research; however, educators and scholars alike have realized the need to educate students about the media—the benefits and dangers associated with media consumption.

Media literacy is woven into civic and political engagement; however, approaching media literacy is not sufficient to foster civic or political engagement—it requires a deliberate commitment to civic engagement. As Dahlgren (2009) explains:

*The media are a prerequisite - though by no means a guarantee - for shaping the democratic character of society; they are the bearers of democracy’s political communication beyond face-to-face settings. During the modern era, their role in making politics (and society) visible, in providing information, analysis, forums for debate, and a shared democratic culture, is beyond dispute. (pp. 2-3)*

To assume that media literacy is enough to promote civic engagement ignores the complexities of democracy.

*Many factors shape late modern democracy, and we would be foolish to lapse into media-centrism and reduce everything simply to the workings of the media. How we think about public issues, for example, is not simply a mirror of mediated political communication, but the result of an array of variables. (p. 3)*
Within political communication research, the effect of media has been widely studied; however, Graber and Holyk (2012) argue that most research privileges print media over audiovisual in relation to people political knowledge and civic engagement. Graber and Holyk (2012) argue that there are two schools of thought regarding citizens’ information literacy, the fact-mastery school and the behavioral school.

The fact-mastery school tends to measure the ability of citizens to be able to recall political facts, such as world leaders, geography, and the structure and function of government institutions. Graber and Holyk (2012) suggest that modern democracies have become too complex for the average citizen to keep up with this information—even politicians and political experts specialize. Based upon the fact-mastery school, political knowledge is abysmally low for the average citizen. Graber and Holyk (2012) advocate more for the behavioral school, where citizens have a general understanding of political issues and can do their essential tasks, “discussing selected political issues, voting, and occasionally lobbying” (p. 153).

The behavioral school considers:

(1) human information processing capabilities, in light of human physiology and psychology; (2) the political environment in representative democracies where citizens perform only a limited number of functions and (3) the nature and quality of the information environment. (Graber & Holyk, 2012, p. 153)

Effective media literacy and civic engagement requires and understanding of the complexities of modern civic life and the limitations that exist. What constitutes meaningful civic engagement depends on who one asks. As Woolard (2017) argues, civic engagement must be intentional, deliberate, and informed by civic engagement research.

THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, KNOWLEDGE, AND POLITICS

Since the inception of mass media there has been significant research into how media influences politics—far too much to cover in one chapter. With this in mind, this chapter will highlight some of the relevant aspects of post-truth politics and the new political landscape and their relationship to civic engagement and political knowledge.

Political Cognition

Given the complicated nature of a modern democracy, how do citizens make sense of and act upon political information? “The traditional view of the way citizens gain information from the media is dominated by imagery of a vegetative audience, passively absorbing media influence” (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992, p. 8). In this view, audiences are not able to comprehend or judge media messages. “This notion of a helpless audience is both the oldest and most broadly focused paradigm of political communication effects” (p. Neuman et al., 1992, p. 9). As Neuman et al. (1992) and Graber and Holyk (2012) argue, politics in a modern democracy is far more complicated to assume that the media can dictate political opinion to a passive audience.

Neuman, et al. (1992) suggest that individuals develop political attitude and opinions by drawing upon multiple sources of information from the media, personal experience, conversations, etc. to form a “political cognition” or pool of knowledge. Drawing upon this idea, Self (2011) suggests that political knowledge,
whether it is derived from news media or entertainment media, contribute to individual political cognition (not to mention other informal sources of information). “There is considerable evidence that emotional responses to political symbols, often developed early in life and persisting through adulthood, influence political choices and the processing and conceptualization of new political information” (Neuman et al., 1992, p. 15). Media influence is one of many factors that contribute to a person’s political attitudes.

**Ideology and “Alternative Facts”**

In an interview on *Meet the Press* on January 22, 2017 (shortly after Trump’s inauguration), Kellyanne Conway, President Donald Trump’s senior adviser, was defending Sean Spicer’s, Trump’s press secretary, statement that Trump’s inauguration audience “was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration, period” (Todd, 2017). The host, Chuck Todd, pressed Conway on this statement, arguing that there was not fact to support that statement and calling Spicer’s statement a “falsehood.” Conway responded, “You’re saying it’s a falsehood. And they’re giving—Sean Spicer, our press secretary—gave alternative facts.” After a heated exchange, Todd responded, “Alternative facts aren’t facts, they are falsehoods” (Todd, 2017). This exchange underpins some of the frustration with the Trump administration. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson states:

*Presidents do deceive, and their press secretaries are part of that process. But I can’t recall an instance in which a press secretary has made a blatantly false statement about something as trivial as the number of people at an inauguration. Deceiving about something inconsequential seems anomalous. [In the early days of any administration], the press is looking very, very closely to try to learn anything that can be learned. It tends to feature whatever it’s got. The president has the ability to drive the press’s focus to things that matter, and he didn’t.* (Whelan, 2017)

As Keyes (2004) suggests, people do not like to be called a liar, and there are numerous euphemisms and terms used to deflect a charge of lying, “alternative facts” is just another term.

Perhaps a more useful way to think about “alternative facts” is to think about them as alternative narratives. Donald Trump built his candidacy on populism; however, he lost the popular vote and fewer people came to attend or celebrate his inauguration—both facts contradict Donald Trump’s grand ideological narrative.

Ideology can be broadly defined as a system of ideas, belief and values, and often there are multiple ideologies that can exist within a given society or group (Hawkes, 2003). An understanding of ideology, particularly the ideas advanced by Gramsci (1971), provides a framework to analyze and compare ideologies. Gramsci (1971) takes the position that culture plays a heavy role in class relations rather than class relations being dictated by the economic system. For Gramsci, economic power and political power are the results of a cultural change in the society. Gramsci’s (1971) developed a concept called common sense, which is the uncritically absorbed customs or ideas imposed by an ideology. Laclau (1977) states, “[c]ommon sense discourse […] is presented as a system of misleading articulations in which concepts do not appear linked by inherent logical relations, but are bound together simply by connotative or evocative links which custom and opinion have established between them” (p. 7). Common sense is disjointed and fragmented in nature and often is justified simply as this is just how things are done or simply as a cultural expectation (Hall, 1996). Common sense may be true or false but is generally accepted by society. Gramsci, contrary to Marx, believed that ideology could have both posi-
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tive and negative effects. On the one hand, ideology can be used to manipulate people and groups. On the other hand, it can liberate people and groups through resistance. Good sense is common sense after being rearticulated in a way that benefits society. Gramsci’s concept of ideology explains how ideology can be positive. As Graber and Holyk (2012) explain, modern democratic culture is extremely complex, and ideology is one way that people make sense of that confusion.

In relation to media literacy, it is important to note that Gramsci’s work stems out of cultural analysis—he was attempting to understand how Italian culture shifted from Latin high culture (i.e. the Roman Empire) to fascism (i.e. Mussolini). A worthy comparison to today’s post-truth politics. Gramsci (1971, 2012) instigated the role of myth, folklore, mass media, popular culture, and music played in the creation of and resistance to fascism. As Landy (1994) explains:

The notion of contestation suggests that the pastiche of common sense with its various appropriations of bits and pieces from religion, science, proverbs, folklore, magic, and history is potentially dynamic and accessible to analysis. [T]he practice of isolating texts for study from the contexts in which they are produced and consumed inhibits an understanding of the meaning or possibilities of “contested space.” Cultural politics in the Gramscian sense would remain aloof from narrowly construed conceptions of textual study. This cultural politics would pay attention to locating and analyzing those moments of “good sense” embedded in common-sense discourses as a sounder basis for understanding the limits and possibilities of social transformation. (p. 98)

Silverblatt, Ferry, and Finan (2009) approach ideological analysis from a narrower media industry perspective, but advocated ideological analysis and mythic analysis (also connected to ideology) as major approaches to media literacy.

MISINFORMATION AND CONSPIRACY

As discussed previously, there is a tendency to assume that people make political decisions rationally, carefully weighing evidence and perspectives to make the correct decision. This assumption underpins liberal education, civic engagement, and media literacy. Some may look at post-truth politics and long for a better, golden age of democracy; However, misinformation has always been a strategic part of politics, regardless of political ideology. As Edelman (2001) explains:

Virtually all political groups and individuals benefit at times from misleading and inaccurate assumptions and accordingly have an incentive to create and to disseminate such beliefs. More often than not their proponents probably accept them as valid, though some are cynically manufactured to serve political purposes. A very high proportion of the beliefs that guide political conduct and political rhetoric accordingly are myths. (pp. 3-4)

While the methods of dissemination of misinformation have improved in the post-truth era (through social media and the Internet), misinformation can offer a strategic advantage in politics. Edelman (2001) argues that most people fail to understand how policy is made and how influence is exerted in government, thus, “beliefs about [government] are very largely suggested by prejudices and by skewed media reporting that focuses on personalities and ignores economic and social inequalities and relationships” (p. 4).
Nichols (2017) and Keyes (2004) would argue that American political culture have somehow entered a new era of misinformation, Edelman (2001) would argue that we have entered a nuanced era of misinformation—driven by new mediums—but the way that people develop a political cognition remains the same. Civic engagement and media literacy can provide tools and skills to influence how people make political decisions; however, misinformation it part of the political process.

Related to misinformation, conspiracy theories may have no connection to a factual reality, yet can be persuasive. Conspiracy theories, “simplifies the world and complex problems and issues, and it links apparently unrelated events, actions, and groups to reveal orchestrated actions that cause all sorts of social, economic, political, religious, and moral evils” (Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 2012, p. 286). Whether there is any sort of factual evidence supporting a conspiracy theory is irrelevant, it is a method of sowing distrust regardless of political ideology. In fact, the lack of factual evidence becomes evidence itself—that the claim is so true that there is a massive cover-up to prevent evidence from being leaked. “While few audiences are truly paranoid or ignorant of facts disseminated through the media and other sources, the mere accusation of a conspiracy, may be enough to prove it for some” (Stewart et al., p. 286). Once conspiracy theories are introduced it may be “impossible to disprove or dispel because inferences may be more persuasive than documents” (p. 286). Misinformation and conspiracy theories are both methods of deception and distrust and can manipulate people and politics.

Fake News

In the 2016 campaign and beyond, fake news has become a normalized term. Fake news has three distinct uses in political communication. The first use of fake news can be seen in the discussion of news parody and satire, the author refers to this use of fake news, as faux news and is discussed below. The second use of fake news refers to news-like deception—false stories and fake websites. The third use of fake news has been coopted by the Trump administration to describe actual, factual news that is negative. As Hall Jamieson explains:

*I’d like to call [fake news] “viral deception.” By virtue of saying “fake news” we ask the question, well, what is real news—and you invite people to label everything they disapprove of “fake news.” What are we really concerned about? Deception. And deception of a certain sort that goes viral. Much of that isn’t imitating news, it’s imitating news-like structures, narrative in form. If we say we’re only concerned with fake news, we may be missing a lot of things that are going viral that are deceptive and things that are found in quasi-fake news sites trying to look like the CNN website, for example, aren’t only found there, sometimes aren’t found there at all. They’re found in other kinds of channels. I’d like to also say that when you appropriate the credibility of news, you pretend you’re the “cnn.com” website—or factcheck.org website, when you are not—that’s identity theft.* (CNN, 2017)

Fake news in the 2016 presidential campaign originated from a relatively small number of producers, many in Eastern Europe, who create false, sensationalized news stories for social media. Content creators of fake news received payment from advertising. Many of these stories went viral (Smith & Banic, 2016).

The impact of fake news is hard to measure, many people read the articles but it is difficult to measure how many people believed the content. However, the perception that fake news has sown confusion in American politics is overwhelming. 88% of people believe that fake news is sowing confusion in American politics (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016). Donald Trump has been able to capitalize
on the concern for “fake news” with the American public, using the term to discredit legitimate news media. Anything that is negative, Trump has labeled it fake news (Balluck & Calfas, 2017; Kurtzleben, 2017). This of course functions the same as an “alternative facts,” it is an ideological ploy.

There has always been fake news, but with social media, fake news can reach an even larger audience. While fake news in the last election cycle is alarming, it has also punctuated the need to media literacy education and prompted calls to action on fake news. Facebook and Google have announced plans to address fake news through the Internet and social media (Gunaratna, 2016). Fake news has also called into question the news media role to call out and expose fake news (Rutenberg, 2016). Fake news is a teachable moment for media literacy educators, and the public is concerned.

Faux News and Political Satire

There is a growing body of research that suggest that political satire is linked to public culture—that political satire is related to political engagement (Hariman, 2008; Jones, 2010). Incorporation of political satire introduces a different set of processes (e.g. critical media literacy, and rhetorical analysis); however, the purpose remains the same; to engage students in democratic culture. Democratic engagement creates space to discuss the role of political satire in democratic culture, public deliberation (whether deliberate or a postmodern pastiche), and engagement. Jones (2010) suggests that political satire, or “entertainment politics” has omnipresence in media and culture; however, has widely been ignored in political research—it is not a common process explored through engagement scholarship.

To understand humor as argumentation, one must first understand the concept of parody, satire, and irony. Parody, which may be difficult to define, involves the recreation of a text (i.e. a film, performance, literary work) for making it humorous (Hess, 2011b). Much of the meaning and humor of parody involves an interaction between the original text and the parody. For example, when a comedian takes on the persona of a public figure, including idiosyncratic tendencies, but overemphasizes characteristics for comedic effect. Satire draws upon parody in that it is also a recreation of the original text; however, satire overemphasizes or distorts in such a way as to make an argument about the original text (Hess, 2011b; Hodgart, 1969; Self, 2011). For example, taking the same example as above, but adding in an argument about this public figure lack of social skills or emphasizing a falsehood or misdeed the person had committed, etc. The end goal of satire is comedy, but also to present an argument about the world. As Hodgart (1969) argues, “I would suggest that true satire demands a high degree of both commitment to, and involvement with, the painful problems world, and simultaneously a high degree of abstraction from the world” (p. 14).

Both parody and satire rely upon irony in some way. Irony can simply be defined as when a speaker’s (or a rhetor’s) intended meaning is not what is literally being said (Booth, 1974). Self (2011), drawing upon Booth’s (1974) work, explains how to understand irony rhetorically. Frist, the audience must reject the literal meaning of the speaker’s discourse. Second, the audience must construct alternative meanings. Third, the audience must test alternative meanings based upon their knowledge of the speaker. Fourth, the audience must construct a new meaning (Self, 2011) Irony is deeply contextual, relying upon the audience to extract the true meaning the speaker intends for them to understand. Self (2011) argues that the audience must have a good sense of the speaker and his or her intention. Using The Daily Show as an example, Self (2011) notes that the audience’s relationship with Jon Stewart is built on credibility and the amount of time devoted to build a common understanding of news stories, irony becomes a strong mode of persuasion—Stewart can more easily lead his audience to his intended ironic meaning.
Stewart is seen as highly credible (Barbur & Goodnow, 2011). In relation to argumentation and persuasion, satire and irony allow for a speaker to simultaneously present his or her own argument and frame oppositional arguments. Presenting oppositional arguments and critiquing those arguments increases the persuasive effect (Self, 2011).

Jones (2010) argues that political humor is widely ignored in political research—the assumption is that politics is too serious of a subject to look at “trivial” humor. However, many scholars are beginning to look at the very powerful connection between humorous media and viewers’ political engagement, suggesting that humorous media can actually facilitate student engagement (Dahlgren, 2009; Jones, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2008; Xenos & Becker, 2009). Self (2011) asserts that political humor can and does have an impact upon individual attitudes, while at the same time, it is difficult to track its influence. While it is difficult to fully measure the effect of political humor on an audience, rhetorical theory can help to understand the elements that make political humor salient and influential.

Barbur and Goodnow (2011) examine *The Daily Show’s* credibility. At one point, major news media outlets were considered a gateway to an informed citizenry, free to uncover and search information for the public; however, news media have moved from a service to a commodity—from serious and frank discussion of current events and issues, to a theatrical spectacle (Baym, 2005). This dramatic shift has many consequences, including a loss of credibility for traditional news and dwindling viewership, especially among youth (Morris, 2009). Barbur and Goodnow (2001) argue that in an age where traditional news media are losing credibility, *The Daily Show* with its charismatic host, Jon Stewart, is gaining credibility. In fact, *The Daily Show* continues to win awards and accolades for journalism (Pew Research Center, 2008). Drawing upon Aristotle’s idea of ethos (credibility) and rhetorical theory, Barbur and Goodnow (2011) demonstrates how *The Daily Show* exhibits ethos.

Aristotle (1991) argues that people are persuaded through logical appeals (logos), emotional appeals (pathos) and appeals to credibility (ethos). Ethos also bridges logical arguments and emotional appeals—for Aristotle, ethos was a composite of the artistic proofs (Barbur & Goodnow, 2011). “In more modern terminology then, rhetorical effectiveness might be seen as a practical application of psychology as a speaker makes judgment about and adapts to their audience’s outlook, prejudices, and emotions” (Barbur & Goodnow, 2011, p. 5). From Aristotle’s perspective, ethos is the projected image of the speaker’s credibility upon the audience. While the actual moral character is important, Aristotle was more concerned with the audience’s perception rather than the speaker’s actual character (Barbur & Goodnow, 2011).

Ethos is comprised of three major elements: phronesis, arete, and eunoia. Phronesis can be described as the speaker’s ability to exhibit practical wisdom, intelligence, and good sense, particularly in relation to the speaker’s community—goodwill for one’s community (Aristotle, 1991; Barbur & Goodnow, 2011). As Barbur and Goodnow (2011) note, phronesis is not just a laundry list of traits and abilities, but is using good judgment to adapt to situational factors. Arete refers to the moral character or virtue that a speaker possesses. For Aristotle (1991) moral character is something that is habitual, not simply based upon on or two instances, but consistent and balanced traits a person exhibits. Eunoia or good will is the perception that the audience feels the speaker has their best interest in mind—they are on the audience’s side (Aristotle, 1991). As mentioned above, this is where humor fits into persuasion. Taken together these three elements build off each other and provide a composite of the speaker.

Sigmund Freud (1976) also investigated the nature of humor. For Freud, laughter and humor are not only intellectual phenomena, but have a very strong physiological link as well. Laughter is a cathartic response, in much the same way as sex. What Freud (1976) argues is that pleasure is connected to the buildup and release of stress. Humor also serves that function as well. If one was to consider the nature
and form of a joke this connection is clear. In a joke, one has the setup and the punch line. Freud would argue that whenever the setup is recognized by the audience, stress is built up. Upon the punch line, there is the release of that stress through laughter. Unlike sex, humor is not necessarily connected to a physical stimulus (although it is a physical response)—humor and laughter is a more intellectual response. As Aristotle said, “Humour is the only test of gravity, and gravity of humour; for a subject which does not bear raillery is suspicious, and a jest which will not bear serious examination is false wit” (as cited in Jones, 2010). While we tend to discount humor as lacking seriousness, Freud (1976) and Aristotle would argue that humor functions as a critical investigation of ideas. Gruner (1997) argues that there is power in the playful nature of humor—it allows us to critically think and be critical in a non-threatening and creative way. Freud (1976) also states that we find humor in situations where something mechanical happen to a biological entity. When someone suddenly falls, or is hit by an object we tend to laugh. Gruner (1997) argues there are multiple ways to look at humor theoretically, including incongruity theory (i.e. we find humor when two ideas or actions are not congruent, yet are connected); however, he posits humor is about winning and losing—it is a matter of competition. He likens humor to a basketball game. When one team beats another team by a significant number of points, their fans are not surprised by the outcome. On the other hand, if the game is close, and it could go either way, there is an element of surprise whenever one team makes the final shot and wins the game and the fans are in an uproar. Gruner argues humor is about a sudden “win.” Gruner (1997) also follows Freud’s (1976) argument that laughter and humor is a cathartic response—if one takes out the suddenness of the win, one removes the humor of the situation. Simply there is no sudden release of stress. Gruner’s idea of competition and power is something articulated by both Aristotle (Aristotle, 1991; Jones, 2010) and Freud (1976).

Although political satire and humor are meant to be entertaining, entertainment can engage, inform, and persuade people.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has highlighted the ideological and philosophical foundations of civic and political engagement and media literacy in higher education and provided some of the foundation theoretical perspectives that inform politics and a post-truth era. While most in higher education would advocate for civic engagement and media literacy, it takes commitment and thoughtfulness to make both pedagogies effective.

While post-truth politics challenges the very foundation of American democracy, it also provides many opportunities to foster open inquiry, critical thinking, and political participation. With a greater understanding of the role that media plays in political culture, civic and political engagement can better foster critical thinking. And with greater understanding of civic and political engagement, media literacy can not only teach students to be critical consumers of media content, but also to become more politically active.

There is still some debate into the influence and implications of media and political culture—some are rightfully concerned by the events of the 2016 election cycle and a Trump presidency and the health of American democracy. The implications of a post-truth era are still to be fully realized; however, there is widespread agreement that higher education and liberal education is part of the solution to what ails democratic culture.

The challenge of a post-truth era for media literacy is not to motivate students to be skeptical of information or to goad students to conduct their own, independent research—students do that already.
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(Nichols, 2017). The real challenge for media literacy is to teach the critical thinking skills so that students can effectively evaluate information, source credibility, and understand the value of true expertise. Understanding one’s own ideological perspective and the influence of ideology upon information can go a long way towards civic engagement and media literacy. While Nichols (2017) argues that higher education is partially to blame for the death of experts, he also sees higher education as the best mechanism to re-center expertise—this is something that both civic/political engagement and media literacy education can accomplish.

Media culture has become increasingly participatory since media literacy education was first discussed in higher education. With mediums like YouTube and social media, everyday people can create do-it-yourself (DIY) media products and directly communicate with experts, journalists, celebrities, politicians, and other audience members. While this makes media culture infinitely more complex—it also affords much more audience agency. Increased student agency has the potential to transform civic engagement and media literacy education. Rather than talking about political and media problems in the academic abstract—detached from students’ lived experience—it is possible to talk about these issues in the real world with people who may well be able to act. Taking a problem-posing pedagogical approach to civic/political engagement and media literacy education takes advantage of student’s participatory agency.

As discussed previously, the rise of fake news, alternative facts, misinformation, and conspiracy highlights the crisis of information in a post-truth era; however, these are all teachable moments. People are skeptical of information and feel that fake news is influencing American politics. Audiences are becoming more concerned that information is being manipulated (Barthel, Mitchell, & Holcomb, 2016). Civic engagement, political engagement, and media literacy pedagogy can take advantage of this information crisis to motivate students to think critically about their own information consumption and political cognition.

While many are bemoaning this post-truth era as the end of democracy, the truth of the matter is that democracy has always been in some sort of crisis—complex forces have always challenged the established order, for better and for worse. Liberal education, civic engagement, and media literacy all stem from American pragmatism, exemplified in the work of John Dewey. As West (1989) explains:

The pragmatists’ preoccupation with power, provocation, and personality [...] signifies an intellectual calling to administer to a confused populace caught in the whirlwinds of societal crisis, the crossfires of ideological polemics, and the storms of class, racial, and gender conflicts. (p. 5)

The foundations of civic engagement, political engagement and media literacy were laid in the context of crisis. This chapter has outlined some of the contextual forces that affect democracy and the role of media literacy in civic and political engagement; however, overcoming the challenges of a post-truth era requires a sustained commitment by those in higher education to foster students’ political agency and critical thinking skills.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways and at which points in an educational setting do media literacy and civic engagement intersect?
2. If you were asked or assigned to develop a media literacy and civic engagement lesson for a course, what are the essential components to be added?
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3. How has the current political environment changed the way instructors approach media literacy and/or civic engagement? Discuss the challenges and opportunities this new climate creates.

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**ADDITIONAL READING**


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**KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

- **Alternative Fact**: Claims made they reflect an ideological position rather than an objective reality.
- **Civic Engagement**: A pedagogy that fosters skills and motivation for students to fully participate in their communities.
- **Fake News**: False news stories that become viral media content.
- **Faux News**: Political satire and humor that mimic traditional news.
- **Ideology**: A system of interrelates ideas, belief and values.
- **Liberal Education**: A pedagogy that foster a sense of social responsibility and application of knowledge and skills in real-world settings.
- **Misinformation**: False information that is used strategically for political purposes.
- **Political Cognition**: How individuals construct political beliefs drawing for multiple sources of information.
- **Political Engagement**: A pedagogy that fosters skills and motivation for students be politically active.
- **Post-Truth**: Relating to a political climate where individuals rely upon emotion and personal beliefs rather than objective facts.