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From Critical to Partisan: Media Literacy beyond Russiagate

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Abstract

This article calls for a partisan media literacy. It begins by building on Kellner and Share's typology of critical media literacy, ending with their own, which ~~the~~ Ford labels "radical democratic media literacy." Yet in our particular age we need more than criticality, we need partisanship. To make this case, the author turns to Russiagate and the repression of independent media and radical activists ~~its~~ facilitated.

Keywords

Russiagate – Trump – media monopolies – free press

Critical media literacy is about how to read the media critically. It calls for teachers and students to deconstruct, demystify, and decode linguistic and visual media representations. Along the way, educational subjects examine the historical, political, economic, and social relations behind the production and dissemination of media sources, digging into media relationships, the truth value of information and knowledge, ideology, framing, and so on.

Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share (2007) helpfully unpack four different takes on critical media literacy: the protectionist approach, media arts education, media literacy movement, and their own, which they don't label but I will call radical democratic media literacy. The protectionist model, which is found across the political spectrum, views people as in need of protection from ~~a~~-damaging media. We have to learn to read the media to guard against its threat to our normative or ideal life. Kellner and Share object to the

protectionist approach 'because of its decontextualization and media bias, which over-simplify the complexity of our relationship with media and take away the potential for empowerment that critical pedagogy and alternative media production offer' (p. 60). Arts media education teaches students to examine and appreciate the aesthetics of media so they can create their own forms of expression. While they value the emphasis on the production (and not mere consumption) of media, this production is individualistic, technical, and in general not critical enough. The media literacy movement most closely approximates radical democratic media literacy with its emphasis on critiquing and analyzing various forms of media beyond print and questioning what counts as communication and literacy, the critical component is still lacking. Practitioners here, they say, 'openly express the myth that education can and should be politically neutral and that their job is to objectively expose students to all ideas' (p. 61).

Radical democratic media literacy includes elements of the above approaches, but importantly adds in 'an understanding of ideology, power, and domination that challenges relativist and apolitical notions of most media education in order to guide teachers and students in their explorations of how power and information are always linked' (p. 62). The fundamental shift here, I propose, concerns the mobilization of critical media literacy for the radical democratic project, a movement from critique to action, or a reconceptualization of critique *form within* action. Teaching students how to read, utilize, and produce media is integral to fostering participation and communication to enhance liberal democracy and the prospects for a radical democracy. This mobilization operates on the principles of critical autonomy and critical solidarity, the former occurs when the students practices media literacy without the teacher, and the second responds to the fact that students are never isolated or alone and always operating in networks. 'Radical democracy,' they say, 'depends on individuals caring about each other, involved in social issues, and working together to build a more egalitarian, less oppressive society' (p. 63).

Kellner and Share's proposal seems a useful starting point for us over 10 years later. Yet what I want to do is shift the focus away from radical democracy and toward partisanship. This isn't a radical challenge to radical democratic media literacy, but only a change in the political perspective from which it operates. The goal of radical democracy is to create more points of inclusion, more transparency, and more direct participation. Today these appear as stumbling blocks to advancing toward 'a more egalitarian, less oppressive society.' What's lacking is not participation or communication but *partisanship*.

1 From Critical to Partisan

One of the most remarkable and dangerous transformations ushered in by Trump's ascendancy to the White House concerns the liberal recuperation and revalorization of the corporate, mainstream press, those 6 corporations that control upwards of 90 percent of media outlets in the U.S. Many call this the 'free press.' Alternative media—that other 10 percent—are now cast in a suspicious light, many of them accused of being 'Russian propaganda.' Part of me wants to claim that it's here that critical media literacy needs to enter the picture. However, I don't think it's from a lack of reading media critically, but instead from a lack of understanding the political dynamics at work in the U.S. As a result, we have a situation in which liberals and even many leftists are lining up on the same side—and even *protesting for*—intelligence agencies that have consistently repressed social struggles, politicians who've ushered in the most reactionary policies, and the 'free press,' which always promotes the views of its owners and not the masses.

The problem, so I wish to suggest, concerns the non-politics of the pro-Trump/anti-Trump division. With Trump's election, the dividing question of 'which side are you on?' became: do you support or oppose Trump? It might at first pass appear that stating your position on the [US President](#) would perhaps be the ultimate political line, [there's nothing coherent or even stable with the line](#). First, there are all sorts of reasons to oppose Trump. Some oppose Trump because he filled his cabinets with war hawks. Others oppose Trump because he had a diplomatic meeting with another head of state, Kim Jong-Un. The first group opposes war, and the second group opposes diplomacy. Some oppose Trump because he makes virulently racist, sexist, transphobic, anti-immigrant, and generally crude remarks. Presidents shouldn't speak like that, they say. Others oppose Trump because he actually *is* all of those things, not just because he says them in public. Some oppose Trump because he isn't a talented statesman. Others oppose Trump because he sits at the head of what they see as an illegitimate state. Second, there is constant flip-flopping on where people and groups stand in relation to Trump. Whenever someone leaves the Trump administration they're 'welcomed' into 'the resistance.'

One place we see this most clearly is in the Russiagate Scandal. For a while, it seemed like every other day there was a new 'smoking gun' in Russiagate, something that *proved* that Trump *colluded* with Russian operatives and/or politicians to interfere in the 2016 election. Then it seemed like an avalanche of indictments was unleashed. But now that's all slowed down considerably. And we still don't have a concrete piece of evidence that

Trump either colluded with Russia or that Russia interfered in the U.S. election in any coordinated or systematic way. (We have gotten proof, however, of the Trump administration's collusion with Israel, as we now know Jared Kushner intervened on behalf of Israel in December 2016 to lobby against an upcoming United Nations vote against illegal Israeli settlements in Palestine [Hasan, 2017]) The corporate media has made everything it can out of Russiagate. And because there's so much hatred of Trump, many liberals and even leftists have supported Russiagate which, taken as a whole, is debilitating the real resistance in the U.S., escalating the U.S. war machine, and shifting the political spectrum in the country even more to the right.

2 No Need to Critique Intelligence Agencies

Take, for example, the 'Intelligence' Community Assessment (2017) report released in January 2017, which, says there is 'high confidence' of Russian interference. 'High confidence,' as the document says (on the very last page of course), 'does not imply that the assessment is a fact or a certainty; such judgments might be wrong' (p. 13). How critical do we need to be to be skeptical of the report? And what is in the report?

Seven out of the 20 pages of text of the public document—*35 percent of the report!*—is dedicated to Russia Today's coverage of 'divisive' issues in the U.S. As evidence of Russian interference in the 2016 election, they highlight RT's coverage of Occupy Wall Street, the anti-fracking movement, third-party political candidates, the surveillance state, corporate greed and corruption, and critiques of U.S. foreign policy and wars.

RT features a range of voices on its programs, voices that don't find expression on the mainstream channels. Some of the voices are progressive, some are reactionary, and some are mainstream. It's important to note that Abby Martin, who hosted the popular 'Breaking the Set' show that was cited in the DNI report (which, by the way, ended in 2015!), denounced Russia's involvement in Crimea on the air. She wasn't fired or reprimanded, and in fact her show ran for another year, even though *The New York Times* falsely reported that she quit on the air (Martin, 2017). I listen to two daily Sputnik podcasts: *By Any Means Necessary with Eugene Puryear* and *Loud and Clear with Brian Becker*. They started in 2016, and they were *ruthlessly* critical of Trump and Clinton. In fact, both Puryear and Becker were—and are—leading organizers of the anti-Trump movement.

It is true that RT is owned by the Russian state (and Sputnik), just as Al-Jazeera is owned by the Qatari state (royal family, really), PressTV is owned

by the Iranian state, BBC is owned by the British state, and Voice of America is owned by the U.S. state.

RT and Sputnik were forced to register as foreign agents, and Congress revoked RT's press credentials. Moreover, *independent* news groups are also being swept up in the smear campaign. In November 2016, the *Washington Post* ran a story about 'Russian propaganda' news sites (Timbery, 2016), that was based largely on a website ran by 'experts,' PropOrNot.com. And yet, as Ben Norton and Glenn Greenwald (2016) pointed out, the *Post* didn't name one single individual from the organization. The Executive Director was quoted on the condition of anonymity. As Norton and Greenwald state, 'the individuals behind this newly created group are publicly branding journalists and news outlets as tools of Russian propaganda—even calling on the FBI to investigate them for espionage—while cowardly hiding their own identities.' Named in the report was the Black radical website Black Agenda Report (to which this author has contributed). This slandering of any news sites critical of the Clinton machine or Russiagate has continued, and isn't likely to stop.

Everyone should be skeptical of state-owned media, but it shouldn't be censored. Yet that is what is effectively happening. And state-owned media isn't necessarily any less or more biased than corporate-owned media. In the U.S., the media is controlled by 15 billionaires (Vinton 2016). And this is one of the stranger things that's happened over the past year: With Russian-owned or even affiliated media and people and organizations demonized, other media are presented as *objective* or *neutral*. This is incredibly dangerous, as these media outlets promote the ideological positions of those 15 billionaires. During the Iraq War all corporate-owned media closed ranks with the Pentagon, running editorial after editorial about why we had to go to war against the independent sovereign country (Foser, 2010).

In Russiagate the media is accountable to no one. And the false news claims only work to give fuel to Trump's fire. Aaron Maté (2017) ran a piece in *The Nation* denoting a few of the more egregious fake news stories that have been spread. First, he notes that in September news spread that Russian hackers hacked 21 states' voting systems. ~~But~~ that in November a cybersecurity official told a House panel 'The majority of the activity was simple scanning.' Only C-SPAN and Sputnik News covered this correction. Second, and even more disturbing, he points to the CNN story that Wikileaks offered Trump hacked emails from the DNC before their release. CNN said that 'multiple sources' confirmed the e-mail. It turns out, of course, that the e-mail was sent *after* they were already publicly released. This is what passes for 'resistance' journalism in the Trump age.

Russiagate has even painted entire opposition movements in the U.S. as

Russian agents or dupes. When Facebook turned over ‘Russian-bought ads’ (which, by the way, have never been linked to Putin or a pro-Putin force), they found ads for Black Lives Matter events. Now, \$150,000 of Facebook ads can’t exactly swing an election, but that didn’t stop the speculation. Gaby Del Valle (2017) correctly argued that this speculation only serves to discredit activist organizations. They also smeared the legacy of the Black liberation movement in the U.S. by painting Black communist organizers in the early 20th century as nothing [by](#) Soviet spies. In her takedown of this anti-Black Russiagate campaign, Peta Lindsay (2017) notes:

These assertions deny the agency of African Americans, many of whom were amongst the most prominent Black intellectuals of their time, who looked to the Soviet system as an alternative to American racism and exploitation. This interpretation also denies the real solidarity and support that the Soviet Union expressed in their assistance to liberation movements of many Black, brown and oppressed people all over the world.

Lindsay goes on to relay the facts about the tremendous cooperation between the Soviet Union and the heroics of the Black liberation struggle (see Kelley, 1990, for starters).

The narrative of Russiagate is that the U.S. is a democracy, a free society that is threatened by Russia and the evil Putin. But, as Lindsay argues powerfully in the opening to her article, ‘Black Bolsheviks, White Lies:’

A lot of nonsense has been written about the role of Putin’s Russia in subverting ‘our democracy.’ As though our democracy had been functioning perfectly (even reasonably) well, until these shadowy Russian forces purchased a few Facebook ads that sent us all into the streets. It’s a laughable concept. I’m sorry, did Putin acquit George Zimmerman or Jason Stockley? Did Putin shoot 12-year-old Tamir Rice? Russia did not carry out the drug war against African Americans or implement policies of mass incarceration, or pass voter ID laws in the U.S.—all of which have contributed to disenfranchising millions of African Americans over the years. The U.S. has a lot to answer for with regard to systematically denying the democratic rights of African Americans and this is not the first time they’ve tried to deflect criticism for that by blaming Russia.

Can one interfere in a democracy if such a democracy doesn’t exist? Can one

have sovereignty on stolen land?

And what counts as interference? Was it interference when U.S. election consultants helped an unpopular Boris Yeltsin get re-elected in 1996? After his election, TIME magazine ran a cover which read 'Yanks to the Rescue: The Secret Story of how American Advisers Helped Yeltsin Win' (Gardner, 2017). Was it interference when, right before the Brexit vote, then-U.S. President Barack Obama held a press conference saying that, if Brexit ~~Pass~~, Britain would 'move to the back of the queue' for U.S. trade agreements (Palmer, 2016)? Was it interference when the U.S. invaded Panama and kidnapped its president, Manuel Noriega? Was it interference when the U.S. trained and armed sectarian rebels in Syria? Or when they bombed Libya to overthrow Gaddafi?

This is where we need critical media literacy more than anything. We need to critique Trump, but also to critique Russiagate and its proponents; critique RT but also critique *The New York Times*; critique Russia but also critique the U.S. Yet critique isn't enough, because critique ~~implies~~ there's a neutral place from which one can critique, and then ~~they~~ can arrive at a proper position after considering all sides. This is why I'd like to return to the need for *partisan* engagement. Partisanship provides a perspective from which one critiques. It leads us to ask particular questions (e.g., what is Russia's military budget compared to the U.S.'s? How many Russian military bases surround the U.S., and how many U.S. bases surround Russia?). And what exactly is the Russian Federation? What is Putin's relationship to it? Does he single-handedly control every institution there? Or is there also mass opposition to him from within and without the halls of power? Opponents of Putin in Russia, by the way, have said that Russiagate makes Putin look much more powerful than he actually is, which hurts their chances at defeating him (Higgins, 2017).

Because Trump is such an odious figure, many have been swept up in Russiagate. I would suggest that one of the motivations behind Russiagate is to move people out of the streets and into their homes. This is what the Watergate scandal did in the 1970s, according to leading anti-Trump organizer Brian Becker (2017):

Rather than leading a mass movement against Nixon and the system, the progressive sector of society was reduced to the status of spectators watching the sanctimonious, corrupted, reactionary, elite politicians of both parties rant and rave about Nixon's wrongdoings. Liberals could sit at home and cheer on as pro-imperialist and racist politicians (aka 'elected officials') united to topple the hated Nixon.... The radical left,

those who had been in the forefront of the struggles for peace and justice, completely lost the leadership of the anti-Nixon movement.

There is a resistance out there, but it's not located in Congress, let alone in the CIA or the FBI (institutions that were set up to destroy resistance groups), and it's not led by the Democratic Party. The Democratic Party is known on the left as the 'graveyard of social movements.' It's where people's power goes to die.

If critical media literacy is truly oriented toward critiquing the present and inventing a better future—which I maintain it is and must be—the our task is to utilize our educational resources and knowledges to build the real resistance, which is a resistance not to Trump the person, but to the systems that he represents: imperialism, white supremacy and anti-Blackness, sexism and misogyny, capitalism, heteronormativity, ableism, and settler-colonialism. This is the perspective from which we critique ideology, representations, language and discourse, and so on. And we—educators and academics—are the ones who need to take it up, to learn it and practice it.

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Author Queries

AQ1: String of at least 3; up to less than a dozen; between 6 and 8 is common.