**From the personal to the societal –**
**the challenge of moving from everyday 'interpersonal' digital literacies to deeper social understandings**

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## The challenge

We are all familiar with the ways that digital technologies have transformed nearly every aspect of human existence. They have changed how we relate to each other, our families, our lovers, our friends and our colleagues through social media. They have changed the nature of our work from through AI and robots. They have changed the nature of education and learning through platforms as diverse as Youtube, Wikipedia and online scholarship. They have changed the way that governments work, and public institutions function through digital transactions, access to information, surveillance and regulation. They have changed global trade and commercial transactions through logistics management, market knowledge, vertical integration of distribution networks and online shopping. They have changed leisure and entertainment from the development of new forms like computer and video games through to streaming services like Netflix. Underpinning all of these transformations in social relationships and arrangements is the ways that they now mediate what we know about the world, and how that knowledge constitutes and legitimates forms of authority, forms of power and contemporary politics.

This is the topic of my presentation. Not *what* is changing in the actual fields of government, education, work, leisure and so forth but how people are learning to accept, negotiate or cope with the different kinds of agency or authority we now have as individuals in these digitally mediated "post-human" relationships. My argument first of all is that while forms of media literacy or digital literacy have taken their time in becoming an acceptable part of both the school curriculum and, just as importantly what it means to be a responsible citizen, there is now a greater urgency in adapting these kinds of media and digital literacy frameworks for the current situation. Secondly, I want to talk about the differences between everyday, common sense 'interpersonal' digital literacies – that is the kinds of understandings people make up as they learn to live with these technologies – and the more formal critical literacies that we usually encounter in the school or university curriculum. I want to talk about how people can travel *from* the everyday *to* the more formal and who should take responsibility for this, how we might measure it and above all what will happen to our societies if we don't take on this responsibility.

**Every day, 'interpersonal' digital literacies**

In general, the fields of policy, public debate and the school curriculum use the term literacy in two different ways. First of all, it describes operational, functional or instrumental capabilities. In the media or digital fields this tends to mean fairly low-level competences - how to operate software and technologies with fluency and confidence - but can include an awareness of helping people avoid phishing or other kinds of scams, or can offer guidelines about E-safety, and how to protect personal information online. Curiously, these kinds of approaches are often aimed both at the young and the old, both of whom are assumed to be vulnerable, and are often supported by institutions like banks or social security departments as much as the police or child welfare in order to ensure that basic principles of social order and social participation can proceed unhindered. Many countries around the world have these sorts of programs as part of their formal education system but also as part of their public information programmes through adverts on TV and so forth.

This kind of functional literacy is often contrasted with a more sophisticated "critical literacy". Critical literacy can be found in curriculum at school and university level, supporting students to be sceptical about the information they find online in terms of the authority and credibility of sources but can also include analysing how our interactions online are datafied – that is every time we do anything online it contributes to a "shadow text" which enables companies and governments to engage in forms of unprecedented mass surveillance. Understanding how datafication works both at the coding and sociological levels is only part of a critical digital literacy which also includes understanding questions of private commercial ownership, the legal regulatory context for the ways that companies operate, and questions of control, rights and power. Frequently critical literacy draws on an explicitly political language and encourages forms of challenge and opposition to the status quo. It is not just a school subject of course, but key to public debate and to many policy calculations.

But, research about how people live and how we actually make sense of our online experiences and the ways that digital media now affect virtually all aspects of our lives actually shows that this twofold definition of literacy – operational and critical – is not always a very helpful way to explain our place in the world.

Recent research by my colleague at the London School of Economics for the UK information Commissioners for example shows that young people have a high degree of sceptical caution in their everyday engagements with technology. Similarly, colleagues in Australia are looking at the ways that young people understand how their actions are turned into data, for example using apps to show how smart phones can be tracked on maps. Together this research is actually quite persuasive that young people are, as we might say, quite literate or at least quite savvy in their daily media use. In both of these cases, young people had developed quite a high degree of reflexive understanding about the ways that their interactions had implications in terms of being monitored and surveilled through data.

Other scholars have looked at the kinds of psychological games we all play with big media platforms and their AI, showing that people have developed all sorts of cunning strategies in

their "reading" of how they are positioned online. We all have developed everyday ways of coping with what adverts you want to receive, how to silence or enjoy particular kinds of conversations, how to lurk and gamify preferences, likes and dislikes in a whole range of online operations from shopping to social media, to looking after our kids or worrying about how TVs or Internet of things devices like Amazon's Alexa, are watching over us. Studies of health show that people try to control what doctors can know about them and how to move across different health services to avoid detection.

However, while this kind of research is comforting in the sense that people and especially young people are not unprotected, not that vulnerable to our fears that they may be being manipulated or exploited, the research also does point to a kind of deficit. We can see that young people are capable of *adapting, negotiating* or *coping* with the kind of surveillance and intrusive powers that are part of everyday life in a digitally mediated society but the research underscores that people's responses are limited.

For example, in the LSE research I mentioned earlier, Sonia Livingstone was very keen to describe the limits of young people's understanding of datafication. She describes this in terms of their knowledge being limited to the "interpersonal". In other words, while people learn strategies to be online their strategies are limited to their own personal well-being rather than at the level of understanding implications for society as a whole. The LSE research did try to model three levels of understanding around data: the interpersonal, the commercial and the institutional, suggesting that young people somehow reached a natural limit in their understanding left to themselves and their peers. Furthermore, that research noted how the young people became angry at the thought that they were being exploited so one question to consider is how a form of education that explains to people that they are being manipulated but that they can't do much about it, plays out. I shall return to this question of living with data, later.

No form of education that does not help people understand their own position and their own experiences is likely to be a successful pedagogic strategy; but by the same token thinking about datafication simply in terms of the personal dimension rather misses the point. It may strengthen individual responses and this kind of research should be the starting point for school curriculum or policy initiatives as it clearly shows individuals are neither hapless nor hopeless in the face of these changes. However, what it really does is show how limited our curriculum and public debate is when it comes to explaining and making sense about the role of data in digitally mediated societies.


**From data resignation to data literacy (or data cynicism)**

While several researchers have noted peoples sense of anger and outrage when they come to realise how they are being surveilled and monitored by digital technologies, scholars have also noted that this anger does not manifest itself in resistance, does not lead to people withdrawing from participation across a range of platforms which they themselves recognise are unfair and could possibly hurt them, but in fact leads to a strange kind of bargain. One term that has been used to describe this is "data resignation" – a sense that people are prepared to put up with the unfairness because of the advantages they gain

from participating online. This sense of living with technologies being a kind of deal, however, also takes into account people's individual sense of powerlessness. Because digital technologies individualise our usage there is very little sense of being able to act collectively and so each person recognises that they, themselves can't do much about the way they are tracked on Facebook for example. An ironic feature of this dimension of powerlessness is the fact that many of these technologies encourage a feeling of connectedness, bringing people together, of creating new social and public meeting places which seems to contradict this sense of personal individual weakness.

Other scholars have noted how the new economy of what has been called "surveillance capitalism" actually relies on normal everyday participation as a form of "immaterial labour". This means that it is the individual who does all the work. It is our interactions, our comments, our 'likes', our purchases, our choices all of which collectively add up to a form of labour which can then be appropriated or "colonised" in the pursuit of profit for the large technology companies. Again, it is not as if people don't know what they are doing, and as I have already pointed out, often our participation is willing and even takes place with a high degree of reflexive knowledge, but that both the sense that it is a deal worth doing – that the benefits outweigh the work – coupled with a sense of powerlessness, that there isn't anything that anyone person can do about this means that we are in a curious state of willing imprisonment. There is a high degree of self-knowing, a strong sense of reflective literacy at work and yet an inability to use that knowledge in our own interests.

I'm not sure I quite believe in this state of affairs because I'd like to suggest that the idea of literacy underpinning both people's behaviour and their perceived levels of self-knowledge still reduces what they know about their relationships with society through digital technology as fundamentally interpersonal phenomenon. Here we need to go back to the definitions of literacy I mentioned at the beginning of this talk as usually being understood on a continuum moving from functional/operational to critical. I have already noted that research into people's actual literacies, how they read and write, use and interact with digital media challenges that model but before I return to that conceptual discussion I want to think a little bit more about what deeper social understanding or critical literacy might mean in this context and whether it is fair to say that just because people are resigned in the face of digital media technologies, does it mean to say that such resignation is based on a kind of cynicism?

The LSE research speculated about understanding the commercial and institutional dimensions of datafication. This has links with the critical media literacy and critical digital literacy concepts which include a focus on institutions. This tends to mean studies of production practices – knowing how decisions get made within institutions as well as questions of ownership and a broader understanding of the political economy in which such institutions are situated. Shoshana Zuboff's recent book "Surveillance Capitalism" is based upon this kind of institutional study. She particularly draws attention to the mechanisms by which Google went about their business of opening up and controlling huge realms of information in order to exploit its commodification through an advertising-driven model of funding. Other ways of understanding how the industry works describe how global, underpaid and precarious workforce is actually part of the supposed robotization behind, for example, Amazon's "Mechanical Turk or the extraordinarily difficult and complex process

of what it actually means to be a content moderator for Facebook. All of these cases explain practices hidden from users' own experience but are somehow comprehensible as relating to us.

In media studies there is a tradition of studying questions of representation. How certain groups are presented in the mass media, who has a stake in representing, say women, in particular ways and how this then contributes to overall attitudes across society. In the data-literacy domain there have been studies about the ways in which algorithms – for example those employed in face recognition software – work to discriminate against black people in the US and other predominately white societies. Indeed, there are now a host of studies exploring the ways in which the supposedly impartiality of computer code is as much susceptible to prejudices, discrimination and social marginalisation as human interactions in real life.

Finally, I would draw attention to non-academic, non-scholarly exposes in public debate. The concerns around that elections of Donald Trump the US or the Brexit vote in the UK were being mediated by filter bubbles or echo chambers and thus were deliberately manipulated by partisan interests such as by the company Cambridge Analytica -  in addition to other coverage of, say,  frightening attacks being perpetuated by misinformation  on closed WhatsApp groups - are all examples of the ways that the democratic process can be seen to be mediated by digital technologies and thus how the technologies themselves can be seen at work.  Knowing that this might be the case is of central importance to democracy and accountability function in our societies.

There is then a whole set of knowledge and analytic perspectives for which we employ critical approaches about the wider impact of digital technologies across our social lives. Some of this knowledge and approach is part of public discourse but some requires specialist teaching and learning. Where are the places and experts where and from whom, we might learn these things? Where is the support for such knowledge? And finally, how do we support any teaching and learning about these matters into the sort of civil action, the sort of civic responsibilities that would mean that these technologies are held accountable and open to scrutiny rather, then at the moment, where their power seems remote and controlled by a small elite?

**From cynicism to ethics**

I have suggested that in some ways we do live in a digitally literate society and that people act with a kind of personal knowledge, that is often wrapped in forms of cynicism and irony as a mode of self-protection, but that translating such an individual focus into a more sustained critical social awareness is piecemeal and challenging. So we are and are not literate, informed and in control.

A key part of this ambiguity stems from the politics of irony and cynicism. Both modes of expression are highly reflexive and in the context of this discussion it is very easy to interpret young people's parodies on tiktok or the circulation of resistant memes on social media, as demonstrating an informed and critical understanding of the ways that digital media and

digital technologies are affecting wider issues relating to people's understanding of struggles over power. Sometimes these wider expressions of cynicism can gain currency and form part of larger social movements but when they are simply expressions of knowingness they remain locked into the interpersonal, and the individual's perception of the world.

Genuinely critical understanding requires forms of public discourse – often frequently found in school or university classrooms – where analysis is open to debate, challenge and above all a form of wider social sharing. While critical understanding – and here I want us to recall its role in some theories of literacy – remains simply a property of individual intelligence, just a distinctive quality of any one or other highly educated person, it lacks the capacity to make a difference in the world. One of the interesting and paradoxical features of social media is of course the large audiences we can share our views with, the sense of belonging to wider communities and constituencies of interest. This is why social media actually remain worthwhile fighting for and certainly fighting over. Where we change the views of others critical intelligence becomes social action: critical literacy becomes ethical behaviour.

In this context, a key feature of critical understanding is also acknowledging what individuals can't do, what understanding alone does not accomplish in terms of social change. Within the framework of this talk, being critical is also understanding the limits of the interpersonal. And this is partly why literacy and our faith in it is so fragile. At the beginning of this talk I challenged us to think about who should take responsibility for the development of critical understanding, how a society might measure its progress in this domain and what would happen if nobody takes on this role, if we fail to discharge this responsibility altogether?

At the moment, teachers, schools and universities are charged with some of this responsibility. A media and digital literacy curriculum is part of this work. But there are other forms of folk and public pedagogies in play. In contemporary society, parents and parenting is now often held up in public discourse and public debate as an arena where people are deficient and should be taking a more active role in ensuring young people's safety and well-being online. I think some of these discussions about making literacy the responsibility of families and schools is fair but also some of it is just shifting the blame. The control of data, the accountability of big companies, the transparency of government, the role of national regulation are key political and ethical challenges for our time. If we continue to make literacy simply the responsibility of professionals we ignore the way that literacy itself is really a set of wider social relationships. In the past, publishers, state censors, and of course public news media were all parts of the set of social relationships that comprised the healthy literacy of any nation. These features could be listed, scrutinised and visible for all to see. Literacy was not just the individual's capability to read or write; it was where and what people could read, who they could communicate with, whose voices got heard. The digital society challenges this paradigm of national literacy. Now, we need a model of digital literacy where government, the private industries who own so much of our data and our digitally mediated lives, as well as civic institutions like schools and education systems and of course the people ourselves, are all empowered, enabled, protected in terms of rights and safety to participate, express ourselves, be heard, be silent and make the kinds of differences to control their, our, lives in the societies to which we all belong.