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Information literacy in the digital age: why critical digital literacy matters for democracy

Gianfranco Polizzi

Introduction

There is growing concern that Western liberal democracy has been undermined over the decades by citizens' participation deficit in institutional politics and distrust of institutions and the media. More recently, in the context of Brexit and the 2016 US Presidential election, there have also been concerns about misinformation undermining citizens' engagement in civic and political life. Inasmuch as civic and political engagement is highly mediated by the internet – at least in the West (e.g. Europe and North America) – this chapter explores the relevance of information literacy to democracy by looking at its interrelation with 'critical digital literacy', approached here as a set of critical abilities, knowledge and interpretations necessary for engaging with information in the digital age. After unpacking how the internet facilitates democracy while remaining subject to structural constraints, this chapter discusses what has been achieved by media research on critical digital literacy and civic and political engagement. It then draws on political research and democratic theory to discuss how the knowledge and abilities required by citizens to engage civically and politically vary, depending on how we understand democracy.

This chapter addresses gaps within media research, political science and democratic theory. It is argued that critical digital literacy can be a useful concept for democratic practice in line with different normative models of democracy, provided it is not just reduced to the ability to evaluate information in relation to trustworthiness, bias and representation. In order to contribute to the active participation of well-informed and critically autonomous citizens in democracy in the digital age, critical digital literacy needs to include knowledge about the digital environment where information circulates. It needs to incorporate an

understanding of how the internet operates socio-economically along with its potentials and constraints for democracy, politics and civic and political participation.

Information literacy and critical digital literacy

The concept of information literacy transcends traditional and digital media, as it refers to the ability to access, 'identify, locate, evaluate, organise and effectively create, use and communicate information' (Information Literacy Meeting of Experts, 2003, 1). In an age where information is highly mediated by digital media, the boundary between information literacy and terms such as media literacy is blurred (Livingstone, van Couvering and Thumim, 2008). As captured by UNESCO's adoption of media and information literacy (MIL), 'the 21st century digital environment is deeply affecting the meaning and use of media and information' (UNESCO, 2014, 1). As a result, media literacy, traditionally emphasising the critical understanding and creation of media texts, has come to be used as an umbrella term referring to a variety of literacies, including information, media, digital, multimodal and network literacies (Livingstone et al., 2013).

Digital literacy may be understood as a variant of media literacy, one that is specifically about digital media and the internet. It can be interpreted as twofold: while functional digital literacy refers to the practical skills and understanding necessary for engaging online, critical digital literacy should be approached as more than just the ability to evaluate online information. Insofar as the internet offers both opportunities and constraints for democracy and civic and political participation, critical digital literacy needs to include users' understanding of socio-economic issues underpinning how information is accessed, used and produced in the digital age (Buckingham et al., 2005; Buckingham, 2007). It needs to incorporate political economy reflections on how advertising and ownership, for instance, shape how online content is consumed and created, and with what implications. Ultimately, users should understand how using the internet has the potential to affect democracy and civic and political participation (Fry, 2014). It follows that critical digital literacy should be approached as an ensemble of critical abilities, knowledge and interpretations that are essential in the context of democratic participation and social inclusion in the digital age (Trültzsch-Wijnen, Murru and Papaionnou, 2017).

In order to address why critical digital literacy should be conceived in this way and why it matters for democracy, the next section of this chapter reflects on the

potentials and constraints that the internet presents for democratic participation. A section follows on what has been achieved, and with what limitations, by media research on critical digital literacy and civic and political engagement. Within this section links are established with the literature on information literacy and librarianship. Insights from political research are then presented to elucidate how the knowledge and competences that citizens need to engage civically and politically vary on the basis of how we understand democracy. Finally, a discussion on critical digital literacy and democracy follows, showing the complexities of how the former can facilitate the latter. It is argued that a crucial dimension of citizens' knowledge and competences required to engage in democracy in the digital age needs to intersect with critical digital literacy. Relatedly, it is emphasised that the ability to evaluate online information in synergy with knowledge about the broader digital environment can benefit democracy and its different normative models. More specifically, critical digital literacy has the potential to do so by contributing to the civic and political engagement of informed, critically autonomous and active citizens in ways that are mediated by the internet.

The internet and democratic participation

The notion of democratic participation entails not just the activities that citizens perform to influence decision making, but also a psychological dimension (Schonfeld, 1975). Thus, what citizens do to engage in civic and political life may not necessarily influence politics but may be an expression of what matters to them. Such an understanding of democratic participation resonates with the notion of civic and political engagement, which includes citizens' subjectivity about their practices (Dahlgren, 2003). Crucial to institutional and non-institutional civic and political engagement may be activities, both online and offline, which range from using government websites and seeking, sharing and commenting on civic and political content, to signing a petition, using alternative media and participating in a demonstration (Dutton, Blank and Groselj, 2013; Theocharis, 2015; van Laer and van Aelst, 2010).

Western liberal democracy operates through representative institutions and under principles of individual liberty and equality. For decades, it has been affected by a decline in citizens' participation in electoral politics and their alienation as a result of their inability to influence the political process (Coleman, 2013). In an age where nation-states are challenged in dealing with social inequalities by supranational politics and global capital flows, liberal democracy

and public communication in the West have been undermined by citizens' distrust of institutions' and traditional media's ability to represent their concerns (Dahlgren, 2004; Coleman and Blumler, 2009). But while the representative character of Western political institutions has dwindled, we 'have evidence of alternative' practices of resistance and activism 'outside the parliamentarian context' (Dahlgren, 2004, ix). In addition, the advent of the internet has been accompanied by hopes about its potential to revitalise democracy by facilitating both institutional and non-institutional civic and political participation. Because of its interactive features allowing users to consume, share and produce content, the internet has been championed for its potential to decentralise politics, allow marginalised groups to engage civically and politically, foster an online public sphere and facilitate a deliberative democracy where citizens participate in decision making (Benkler, 2006; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Martin, 2015). Furthermore, the internet has been celebrated for strengthening civil society and non-institutional politics by contributing, for example, to better-organised activism and the creation and consolidation of communities and collective identities (Cammaerts, 2015; Garrett, 2006).

However, as a technology that is embedded in power structures, the internet is far from having just a positive potential. Central to an ecosystem characterised by online content, usage and technical features as well as ownership, governance and socio-economic processes (van Dijck, 2013, 28), the internet presents structural constraints. With just a few corporations such as Facebook enjoying most online traffic (Freedman, 2012), the internet reinforces ideological extremism because of how its algorithms amplify and feed users with popular content that generates strong reactions (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Given the internet's implications for privacy and security, issues of surveillance are also typical of the digital age. Insofar as user-generated content is shared with advertising companies by corporations such as Google and Facebook, the internet contributes to both commercial and government surveillance, as such corporations often work closely with governments (Fuchs, 2010; McChesney, 2013). Online content, furthermore, is fragmented and polarised (Sunstein, 2007). And as the fake news phenomenon demonstrates, it is also subject to issues of trustworthiness, bias and (mis)representation, issues that undermine democracy and its reliance on a well-informed citizenry (Garrett, 2006; Oxley, 2012).

Critical digital literacy and civic and political engagement within media studies

Not inherently democratising or undemocratic, the internet offers opportunities for reinvigorating democracy by contributing to institutional and non-institutional engagement in civic and political life. However, as it also poses challenges, citizens need to engage with information in the digital age in ways that involve an understanding of its civic and political potentials and limitations. Conceived as incorporating knowledge about the digital environment, critical digital literacy can encourage civic and political engagement and contribute to democracy. To reflect on how it may be expected to do so, it is worth drawing on what has been achieved in media studies, highlighting the gaps within different traditions.

Given media studies' interdisciplinary nature, approaches to media literacy have drawn on, and overlapped with, traditions ranging from social psychology, cultural studies, critical pedagogy, information science and the New Literacy Studies, which see literacy in socio-cultural terms, rather than just as an individual, cognitive phenomenon. These traditions have generally focused on education and young people rather than adults. But such a focus does not necessarily lie in opposition to civic and political engagement. A few studies implementing quantitative methodologies widely adopted in social psychology have measured the extent to which critical analytical skills and knowledge about traditional media in the context of media education correlate with civic and political engagement. They have argued that the ability to analyse and evaluate traditional news media is associated with civic engagement online (Martens and Hobbs, 2015). Appreciation of knowledge about news production and bias in the news corresponds to higher levels of civic engagement online and offline (Hobbs et al., 2013). Knowledge about mass media structures correlates with the intention to participate in media activism (Duran et al., 2008). And the ability to evaluate the trustworthiness of websites is associated with political engagement online and 'higher levels of online exposure to diverse perspectives' (Kahne, Lee and Feezell, 2012, 19).

Another strand of research that has looked at critical literacy and civic and political engagement in the context of education has taken inspiration from critical pedagogy and cultural studies. A major emphasis of this strand lies not only in the ability of internet users to critically evaluate media content, but also in their ability to express their voices by producing alternative media, re-writing media content subject to prejudice, bias and misrepresentation (Kellner and

Share, 2007). While this strand has remained focused on students' learning practices, to a less extent it has also underpinned work on social movements and activists' engagement with alternative media (Feria-Galicia, 2011). Critical pedagogy prescribes a teaching approach that encourages students' critical reflections against dominant representations together with political action (Freire, 2005; Luke and Freedboy, 1997). A limitation of this approach is that it has often assumed a relationship between critical literacy and political engagement. Drawing on critical theory, it has perpetuated the idea of social action as necessarily critical of dominant ideologies.

In an age where politics is increasingly polarised, it is essential to differentiate between, on the one hand, the questioning of media representations with a view to empowerment and on the other, misinformation propagated, for instance, by far-right ideologies questioning media credibility (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017). Nevertheless, we also need to recognise that the potential of critical digital literacy to debunk misrepresentation and misinformation is not exclusively at the service of progressive and liberal ideologies. Critical pedagogy has overlooked the extent to which the questioning of dominant representations can be aligned with conservative politics and, problematically, with extreme ideologies disregarding evidence with the objective of delegitimising the political process. Such ideologies entail a risk of succumbing to a post-truth society where emotions, personal beliefs and distrust in expertise prevail over respect for evidence (Nichols, 2017). Restrictively, critical pedagogy has left little room for more comprehensive interpretations of civic and political engagement as institutional/non-institutional and ideologically multifaceted. In addition, it has encouraged citizens' critique against dominant representations while only sporadically emphasising the importance of understanding media structures and the broader digital environment where information circulates (Pangrazio, 2016, 164).

With the advent of digital media, the overlap between information literacy and media literacy has signalled the convergence of information science and media studies (Livingstone, van Couvering and Thumim, 2008). As with media scholars, information scientists and librarianship scholars have drawn on critical pedagogy to approach critical information literacy as the ability to question power and authority in ways that facilitate social justice (Correia, 2002; Elmborg, 2006; Jacobs and Berg, 2011). The new definition of information literacy adopted by CILIP (2018) resonates with such an approach in the way that it recognises the relevance of information literacy to citizenship. From such a perspective, librarianship has been interpreted as inherently promoting democratic values such as intellectual freedom and access to knowledge (Gregory and Higgins,

2013). However, only on occasion has critical information literacy been approached as including the questioning of 'the social, political, economic, and corporate systems [. . . underpinning] information production, dissemination, access, and consumption' (Gregory and Higgins, 2013, 4; Cope, 2010). In a similar vein, few media scholars have drawn on critical pedagogy to approach critical digital literacy as incorporating an understanding of the internet as embedded in power structures, in relation to production/consumption processes and its democratising potentials and structural constraints (Buckingham, 2007; Fry, 2014). Unlike critical digital literacy, however, most definitions of information literacy do not explicitly incorporate knowledge about the internet. They do not address 'the now pervasive online environments' where information circulates in the digital age (Mackey and Jacobson, 2011, 63).

The New Literacy Studies represent another tradition that is relevant to media studies. Approaching different literacies as embedded in the social context, this tradition has explored young people's ability to engage with multimodal content that integrates different media texts (Bulfin and North, 2007; Hull and Katz, 2006; Jewitt, 2008). Nevertheless, it has not always focused on their ability to evaluate content or their understanding of the digital landscape (Pangrazio, 2016, 167). Furthermore, it has placed little emphasis on civic and political engagement. Exceptionally, a few studies have addressed young people's civic engagement with multimedia content within online communities as facilitating the development and sharing of critical reflections on socio-political matters, personal storytelling, blogging and transnational identities resisting dominant representations (McGinnis, Goodstein-Stolzenberg and Saliani, 2007). But only a few have explored young people's understanding of the internet's potential to facilitate, for instance, both surveillance and storytelling (e.g. Shresthova, 2016).

The different traditions relevant to media studies, which have been discussed above, have rarely transcended a focus on education and young people to look at adults' digital literacy in the context of their civic and political practices. Relatedly, they have overlooked how understanding the digital environment may be relevant to civic and political engagement. By contrast, digital divide research has investigated the extent to which users' attitudes and dispositions towards the internet facilitate their online engagement (Durndell and Haag, 2002; Eynon and Geniets, 2016; Hakkarainen, 2012; Reisdorf and Groselj, 2017). However, having predominantly looked at the functional aspects of digital literacy, this strand of research has retained an individualistic focus neglecting users' civic and political practices and understanding of the socio-political dimension of the internet. A few media studies on social movements, instead, have explored

activists' interpretations of traditional and digital media. They have argued that awareness of the internet's potentials and limitations can facilitate a pragmatic approach to using it for political purposes (Barassi, 2015; McCurdy, 2010, 2011; Treré, 2015). But these studies have made no reference to media literacy theory.

Another limitation within media studies is that although it has been emphasised that critical digital literacy can benefit democracy by contributing to well-informed, critical and empowered citizens, the notion of democracy has been approached rather monolithically by neglecting the different ways in which it can be understood. Some have argued that critical analytical skills and the ability to produce alternative media against dominant representations can facilitate a radical, pluralistic democracy, one that 'depends on a citizenry that embraces multiple perspectives', resulting in more participatory, 'democratic self-expression, and social progress' (Kellner and Share, 2007, 14, 17; Mihailidis and Thevenin, 2013). It has also been suggested that 'it is vital for citizens of a pluralistic democracy . . . to develop . . . competencies [such as] reading or watching the news . . . commenting on an online news story, contributing to an online community network . . . evaluating the quality of information [. . . and] sharing ideas and deliberating' (Hobbs, 2010, xi). The problem, however, is that media research has provided a limited understanding of how critical digital literacy can benefit civic and political engagement in ways that incorporate knowledge about the digital environment. Furthermore, what has remained obscure is how critical digital literacy can do so depending on how we conceive of democracy. In order to address these questions, it is worth drawing on political research and democratic theory.

Citizens' knowledge and competences in democracy: insights from political research

Political education studies have argued that 'to be engaged in democracy, there must be political literacy, the absence of which would make the prospect of meaningful social justice in society less likely' (Lund and Carr, 2008, 13). Political literacy revolves around factual knowledge of history, the political system, political and community groups, government, politicians and civic and political affairs. It also includes the ability to participate in politics, influence decision making and engage with communities. Ultimately, resonating with information literacy and critical literacy, it may be understood as entailing informed judgements based on critical thinking and 'respect for truth and reasoning' (Lund and Carr, 2008, 14; Davies and Hogarth, 2004; Giroux, 2017).

Within political theory, Robert Dahl (2006, 52) has argued not only that citizens need to know how to use resources such as time and money, but also that democracy depends on 'equal opportunities' to develop 'enlightened understanding[s]' and the ability to 'seek out independent information' (Dahl, 1998, 37–8; 2006, 12).

While the concept of political literacy overlaps with information literacy and critical literacy, political science and political communication studies, lying at the intersection of political research and media studies, have *de facto* focused on political knowledge as 'the primary indicator of citizen competence' (Rapeli, 2014, 2). Referring to factual and objective knowledge, the concept of political knowledge lacks a subjective dimension concerned, for instance, with 'whether . . . information is perceived to be correct or not' (Rapeli, 2014, 11). Except for a few studies (e.g. Bennett, Wells and Rank, 2009), political research has overlooked whether citizens are able to evaluate information. Instead, it has emphasised that citizens should have factual knowledge of the political system, the government, its rules and values, and how institutions operate (Barber, 1969, 38; Neuman, 1986, 196; Weissberg, 1974, 71). They should understand socio-political contexts and voting procedures (Downs, 1957, 215). And they should be familiar with domestic and international affairs, politicians, parties, key policies, relevant history, socio-economic conditions and political alignments (Dahl, 1992, 46; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993, 1182–3; 1996, 14; Neuman, 1986, 186).

What political research has overlooked is whether and to what extent citizens' required knowledge is underpinned by the ability to evaluate information in relation, for instance, to bias, prejudice and trustworthiness. Furthermore, while we live in an age where civic and political life is highly mediated by the internet, political research (similarly to media research, as suggested earlier in this chapter) has placed little emphasis on citizens' knowledge and interpretations of how the internet operates as a technology embedded in power structures. It has neglected that citizens should understand the civic and political opportunities and constraints that characterise the digital environment where information circulates. A few political scientists have measured the extent to which citizens' perceptions of internet-based electronic surveillance predict online political activity (Best and Krueger, 2008; Krueger, 2005). But they have made no reference to media literacy theory. In short, what has remained silent in political research is that a crucial layer of citizens' civic competence and required knowledge in the digital age should intersect with critical digital literacy.

Despite such a lacuna, recent work in political theory has offered insights into the interrelation of citizens' knowledge and democratic participation, which is

relevant for addressing why critical digital literacy matters for democracy in the digital age. The notion of democracy entails both a descriptive and normative connotation. At the descriptive level, countries in the West are equipped with a system whereby citizens delegate representative power to institutions and politicians through elections. This system goes under the name of liberal democracy, operating under principles of political and economic individual liberty and equality. At the normative level, however, democracy may be understood in ways that build on or transcend the representative character of liberal democracy (Held, 2006). Drawing on democratic theory, Rapeli (2014) has employed Held's description of modern, 20th-century forms of democracy as a frame to theorise that citizens' political knowledge and participation in democracy vary depending on whether the latter is conceived in competitive elitist, pluralistic, participatory or deliberative terms (Rapeli, 2014, 69–74). Such an approach may not be exhaustive, since an understanding of democracy as predominantly dependent on the legal system was deliberately put aside. But it is a step towards refining our understanding of what citizens should know to participate civically and politically, in line with four 'models which are generally considered the main types of modern democracy' (Rapeli, 2014, 78):

1 The **competitive elitist** normative model prescribes liberal democracy as relying entirely on a 'political elite capable of making necessary legislative and administrative decisions' (Held, 2006, 157; Rapeli, 2014, 70). It revolves around citizens' political knowledge of competing parties and their electoral participation.

2 A **pluralistic** vision of democracy assumes that 'power is contested by numerous groups' and emphasises the role of factions seeking political influence (e.g. state, pressure groups, corporations, international organisations) (Dahl, 1982, 5; Held, 2006, 173). Intended as a 'polyarchy', a pluralistic democracy requires citizens' knowledge of politics, policies, electoral competition and political groups. It implies that citizens 'engage in politics in . . . other way[s] than just by voting', as exemplified by their involvement in civil society (Rapeli, 2014, 71).

3 The **participatory** democratic variant advocates 'direct participation of citizens in the regulation of the key institutions of society, including the workplace and local community' (Held, 2006, 215). It emphasises the importance of a well-informed and knowledgeable citizenry that actively participates in decision making (Rapeli, 2014, 71; Held, 2006, 215).

4 Finally, **deliberative** democracy implies that it is 'public deliberation of free

and equal citizens [. . .that] legitimate[s] political decision making'
(Bohman, 1998, 401). It requires a knowledgeable citizenry which, capable
of rational argumentation, participates through deliberation in the public
sphere (Held, 2006, 253; Rapeli, 2014, 72).

Democracy's normative variants present different limitations. While the
competitive model is *per se* elitist, reducing citizens to spectators of the political
process (Held, 2006, 153), a participatory democratic vision is subject to
problems of time and size. It requires citizens to commit time to participate in
civic and political life. And it barely transcends the level of towns and cities to
apply to more complex systems such as nation-states with large populations and
numerous political actors (Dahl, 2006, 118). As a result, participatory
democracy is generally *de facto* approximated as local government-led initiatives
such as neighbourhood committees, public forums and participatory budgeting
– initiatives that make governance more legitimate and interactive but not
necessarily direct (Rosanvallon, 2011, 203–5). Deliberative democracy is
constrained by issues of exclusion intrinsic to expecting citizens to deliberate in
rational terms, lacking an affective dimension. It also assumes too easily
citizens' equal access to deliberation, relying too enthusiastically on the
internet's deliberative potential to facilitate their participation in decision
making (Held, 2006, 238). Finally, the pluralistic model neglects systematic
imbalances in the distribution of power as public policies are generally skewed
towards the interests of more influential, resourceful groups. In addition, it falls
short of recognising that not all groups engaging in democracy are equally
listened to by those in powerful positions (Held, 2006, 165).

Drawing on democratic theory allows us to nuance how we understand what
citizens should know with a view to social inclusion and democratic
participation. What stands out from Rapeli's (2014) approach is that more
knowledge is required as citizens' participation increases, depending on whether
democracy is assumed to be competitive elitist, pluralistic, participatory or
deliberative. As citizens' engagement in civic and political life increases, civic and
political knowledge becomes more essential, not just for legitimising power
through voting, but also for expressing individual and collective interests, holding
politicians and policies accountable, resisting dominant ideologies, calling for
greater socio-economic and political equality, and ultimately contributing to
decision and policy making (Rapeli, 2014, 19, 26–7). With respect to the role that
information and communication technologies play in mediating politics and civic
and political engagement, Rapeli (2014, 5) acknowledges that 'in order to

understand how democracy functions or fails to function, it will become particularly important to understand how political information is produced, managed, presented, received, utilized and recalled'.

To date, however, no links have been established between media literacy theory and how knowledge and participation vary in democracy. Dahl (1982, 144) has emphasised that citizens' required knowledge and competences have become more abstract and complex within the nation-states, as opposed to 'knowledge of . . . the common interest' within smaller contexts enhanced by 'direct experiences and perceptions'. Such an argument implies that what citizens need to know and reflect on to engage in civic and political life can change over time. From this perspective, in an age that is highly mediated by digital technologies, it seems fair to suggest that critical digital literacy should be understood as a set of abilities, knowledge and values that are indispensable for participating in democracy.

Critical digital literacy and democracy

Critical digital literacy does not just involve the ability to critically evaluate information, which is central to the notion of information literacy. Inasmuch as digital media are not neutral but embedded within wider power structures, a critical reading of different traditions relevant to media studies allows us to revisit how we approach critical digital literacy. It enables us to conceive of it as incorporating knowledge and values about the internet in relation to how it operates socio-economically, and how its democratising potentials and structural constraints characterise the digital environment where information circulates. Different strands of research, inspired for instance by social psychology, critical pedagogy or the New Literacy Studies, have offered limited insights into how critical digital literacy facilitates civic and political engagement. These strands have generally explored critical digital literacy in the context of education, overlooking adults' civic and political practices. Conceptually, they have largely approached critical digital literacy as the ability to question online content and dominant ideologies, without necessarily incorporating knowledge about the internet and its civic and political potentials and limitations (Pangrazio, 2016, 164, 167). In addition, critical digital literacy has been interpreted as intrinsic to political engagement that is ideologically critical, as with research inspired by critical pedagogy. Alternatively, in the case of the New Literacy Studies, it has often been explored by privileging a focus on internet users' creativity over their critical reflections (Pangrazio, 2016, 167).

Research inspired by social psychology has emphasised that appreciation of knowledge about bias in the news and the ability to evaluate information correlate with civic and political engagement online and exposure to diverse political opinions (Hobbs et al., 2013; Kahne, Lee and Feezell, 2012; Martens and Hobbs, 2015). Additionally, research aligned with the New Literacy Studies has pointed out that networked engagement within online communities can facilitate the development and sharing of critical debate. And it can contribute to the formation of identities that resist dominant media representations through blogging and storytelling (McGinnis, Goodstein-Stolzenberg and Saliani, 2007; Shresthova, 2016). Insofar as critical digital literacy is essential for debunking online misinformation and misinterpretation, research inspired by critical pedagogy has argued that citizens can resist dominant representations by creating alternative media to express their voices (Kellner and Share, 2007). However, we need to recognise that the questioning of dominant representations can serve different political agendas (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017) – which is why respect for expertise is crucial for countering extreme ideologies that disregard evidence (Nichols, 2017). While these conclusions suggest that critical digital literacy can benefit democracy by contributing to civic and political engagement, critical digital literacy has often been approached restrictively within media studies. And the notion of democracy has also been employed rather monolithically by overlooking that it can be understood in different ways.

The concept of political literacy has been addressed in political education studies as overlapping with information literacy and critical literacy (Lund and Carr, 2008, 13–14). Political research, however, has predominantly employed the notion of factual and objective political knowledge as an indicator of civic competence (Rapeli, 2014, 2). In order to participate in democracy, citizens are expected to have knowledge, for instance, of the political system, how the government works, politicians, policies and civic and political affairs. Depending on how we conceive of democracy, recent research has argued that as citizens are expected to engage more actively in civic and political life, their political knowledge is also expected to increase (Rapeli, 2014). Restrictively, however, this model fails to refer to critical digital literacy as a crucial dimension of citizens' required knowledge and competences in the digital age.

It is only when combining a media studies perspective with insights from political research and democratic theory that we can better understand why critical digital literacy matters for civic and political engagement and democracy, depending on how the latter is normatively understood. It is reasonable to imagine that as citizens' engagement in civic and political life increases in ways

that are mediated by the internet, it becomes more essential for them to have not only political knowledge, but also critical digital literacy. From a competitive elitist perspective revolving around citizens' electoral obligations, it may be supposed that gathering online information – for example, on competing parties, politicians and public affairs – is enhanced by the ability to evaluate content in relation to bias and trustworthiness. And it is also enhanced by knowledge and critical interpretations of the internet, how information is generated online, the role of targeted advertising and what it means for privacy, along with the internet's potentials and limitations for journalism and for navigating civic and political content.

While such a range of abilities, knowledge and interpretations is central not just to a competitive elitist vision of democracy but also to every other model of democracy, questioning online information in synergy with knowledge about the digital environment is crucial for engaging from a pluralistic perspective in ways that go beyond voting and seeking information. From such a perspective, citizens need to be able to evaluate content transcending institutional and electoral politics. They need to be able to engage with alternative media and content produced by activists and different publics, including those that are marginalised from dominant communications (Downey and Fenton, 2003). They need to do so in ways that do not delegitimise respect for evidence and expertise. In addition, citizens need to understand how the internet operates socio-economically, along with its civic and political potentials and limitations. Critically understanding the internet's potential for civil society and activism may be useful for interacting within online community settings, engaging in voluntarism, producing alternative media challenging dominant ideologies as well as organising, and seeking and sharing information about, demonstrations and other forms of public protest. In this respect, media research on social movements has emphasised the importance of understanding the opportunities and constraints of the internet in the context of non-institutional engagement in politics (Barassi, 2015; McCurdy, 2010, 2011; Treré, 2015).

A participatory democratic perspective entails that citizens should not just be aware of how they may participate in decision making – for example, via referenda, public forums or multi-stakeholder initiatives bringing civil society actors together to propose legislation. Inasmuch as citizens' political literacy needs to intersect with critical digital literacy, they should also know what potentials and constraints the internet presents for participating in decision making, reflecting on issues of access and security affecting the possibility of gathering information, exchanging opinions or collaboratively preparing a policy

document. Finally, exemplifying a specific form of participatory democracy, the deliberative model revolves around citizens' deliberative practices, generally promoted through government-led online initiatives. These practices may be enhanced not just by the ability to evaluate information, but also by knowledge about the internet's potentials and limitations for deliberation. Citizens, for instance, should understand the internet's potential to facilitate connectivity and marginalised groups' participation in the public sphere as well as government surveillance and how algorithms affect online visibility, reinforcing polarisation and ideological extremism (Blumler and Coleman, 2010; Hindman, 2009; Martin, 2015; McChesney, 2013; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

For now, the proposition that critical digital literacy can benefit democracy in different ways, depending on how we conceive of democracy, remains theoretical. What needs to follow is empirical research. It may be fruitful to explore civic and political practices ranging in institutional/non-institutional character, mapping out their interrelation with critical digital literacy and different democratic paradigms. Alternatively, a case study methodology may be advisable, based on case studies exemplifying different democratic variants. Regardless of these options, critical digital literacy should be approached not only as the ability to evaluate information online, but also knowledge about the internet in relation to socio-economic issues, its democratising potentials and structural constraints. Combining a media studies perspective on critical digital literacy with insights from political research and democratic theory invites future media research to investigate how the notion of democracy may be employed in relation to critical digital literacy. In addition, it invites political research to acknowledge that a crucial dimension of the knowledge and competences that citizens require in order to participate in democracy in the digital age should intersect with critical digital literacy.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored why critical digital literacy matters for democracy and civic and political engagement. For decades, Western liberal democracy has been undermined by citizens' distrust in politics, traditional media and institutions' inability to represent citizens, and ultimately, citizens' lack of participation in electoral politics. However, not only have non-institutional forms of participation emerged, but the advent of the internet has also been accompanied by hopes about its potential to contribute to both institutional and non-institutional politics. The internet has been praised, for instance, for diversifying political content, allowing

marginalised groups to participate in civic and political life, and facilitating resistance and activism. Nevertheless, as it is embedded in power structures, it also contributes to surveillance and ideological extremism affecting civic and political participation. Among other issues, it also contributes to misinformation and misrepresentation, which undermine democracy and its reliance on a well-informed citizenry.

While information literacy revolves around the ability to access, locate and evaluate information, critical digital literacy should be approached as being about evaluating online content in relation to bias, prejudice and trustworthiness. It should also incorporate knowledge about internet-related socio-economic issues concerning, for instance, how ownership and advertising shape online information. Ultimately, critical digital literacy should be about understanding the internet's democratising potentials and structural constraints. Different traditions relevant to media studies have largely neglected the importance of conceiving critical digital literacy in this way. What we know from these traditions is that the ability to evaluate online information corresponds to higher civic and political engagement and exposure to political content. Critically interpreting media representations is crucial to producing alternative content challenging dominant ideologies. Networked engagement within online communities facilitates the construction and sharing of critical reflections on socio-political matters. Furthermore, despite overlooking media literacy theory, media research on social movements has emphasised that understanding the potentials and limitations of the digital environment is essential for engaging in resistance and activism. Not only has the contribution of media studies remained limited as to how critical digital literacy, as approached here, can benefit democracy and civic and political engagement, but the notion of democracy has also been employed rather monolithically by neglecting the different meanings that it can have. What has remained obscure is how critical digital literacy can benefit civic and political engagement depending on how we understand democracy.

This chapter has argued that a media studies perspective, enriched with insights from political and democratic theory, can help us gain a more nuanced understanding of why critical digital literacy matters for democracy in the digital age. Political education studies have approached political literacy as overlapping with information literacy and critical literacy. But political research has *de facto* focused on citizens' factual and political knowledge as an indicator of civic competence. Even though we live in an age that is highly mediated by digital technologies, political research has paid little attention to the idea that citizens' required knowledge and competences depend on their critical digital literacy.

Recent work in political theory has explored how citizens' political knowledge and participation vary on the basis of whether democracy is normatively assumed as competitive elitist, pluralistic, participatory or deliberative. While this work does not account for critical digital literacy, this chapter has suggested that it can help us understand how critical digital literacy can benefit democracy. What stands out is that as citizens' civic and political engagement increases in ways that are digitally mediated, not only does their political knowledge become more essential, but so also does their critical digital literacy.

By drawing on media studies in synergy with political and democratic theory, this chapter has argued that critical digital literacy can benefit democracy in different yet not mutually exclusive ways aligned with different democratic variants. From a competitive elitist democracy perspective, critical digital literacy can benefit citizens' electoral engagement by allowing them to critically evaluate online content as well as understand how information circulates, and with what implications, in the digital age. While the ability to evaluate online information is essential under each democratic variant, in a democracy conceived as pluralistic, critical digital literacy is crucial for evaluating content transcending institutional and electoral politics. In addition, knowledge about how the internet operates socio-economically, along with its democratising potentials and structural constraints, is particularly relevant in the context of civil society, community engagement, alternative media, resistance and activism. From a participatory democracy perspective, citizens should also understand the internet's potentials and limitations for participating in decision making, in relation, for instance, to issues of access and security affecting government-led participatory initiatives. Finally, in a democracy conceived as deliberative, citizens should be particularly aware of the internet's potentials and constraints for connectivity and participation in the public sphere, and also in relation to government surveillance and issues of exclusion.

By drawing on media studies and political research, this chapter has offered an interpretation of how critical digital literacy can benefit different democratic variants. Not only is critical digital literacy indispensable for citizens' engagement in democracy in the digital age, but it can also facilitate civic and political engagement, in whichever way democracy is conceived.

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