Connecting Culture Through Global Media Literacy

In the current hypermedia age, the borders of information are increasingly indistinguishable. There now exist few, if any, limits to how far, fast, and wide messages may travel. Across the globe—from the growth of community internet in rural Europe and the Middle East,\(^1\) to the expansion of cell phone technology in India\(^2\) and Africa, our media-saturated world is shrinking.

At the same time, the convergence of media platforms has enabled access to information on a global scale. New media technologies have allowed for wide and unfettered consumption of information in many parts of the world.\(^3\) Such progress has brought the world closer together. From recent public health scares, to the economic recession, and continuing efforts to combat climate change, we can no longer ignore the need to understand the role of information in defining issues globally.

Beyond specific issues, the global expansion of media has allowed for new understandings of culture. Nations that are increasingly dependent on one another for economic, political, and social stability must often cultivate public awareness of such relationships through media. This entails an understanding of cultures and communities far removed from physical and geographic familiarity. The current global media environment, as a result, will continue to have significant effects on how individuals, societies, and nations view and interact with one another.
Within this new landscape exists the opportunity for a new type of global citizenship: one that hinges on preparing future citizens for lives of inclusive and active participation in global dialogue. Writes UNESCO’s Benito Opertti:

The challenge is not just to provide criteria and instruments so the child or youth can critically face off to the media, but also to understand that the media contextualize and often determine the ways that people exercise their rights culturally, politically, economically, and socially.\(^4\)

What are the best practices for enabling new understanding of global culture through media?

In the present, cultivating media literacy education for global audiences must embrace much needed educational responses to an increasingly borderless and open media environment. It is no longer an option to ignore the media’s increasingly central role in framing identity. Media literacy can enable future generations to recognize both the power and potential of media to bridge cultural and ideological divides.

**developing media literacy for global audiences**

Media literacy, commonly defined in the United States as the ability to “access, evaluate, analyze, and produce all types of communication,”\(^5\) has been expanding worldwide. Across all levels of education, media literacy is increasingly seen as a core component in preparing the future public for active and engaged citizenship. While media literacy
programs continue to grow within nations, few initiatives have collectively pursued curricular efforts that address media literacy on a global scale.

Global media literacy, as developed in the context of the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change, not only seeks to enhance students’ media analysis skills, but also their critical understanding of media’s larger political, cultural, and ideological implications. In this way, the Academy’s approach to media literacy is based not on specific content, but rather on the application of content to specific cultural contexts.

By shifting the focus from content to context, the dialogue initiated during the three-week program in Salzburg, Austria, approaches media from a cultural perspective. In a global setting finding common ways to discuss media is challenging because of its many diverse voices. The experiences of the Salzburg Academy have shown that attempting to analyze a specific message—whether about health, conflict, economy, or politics—in a global context fails if it is not understood first in terms of where it originated, who created it, in what context it was created, and what values are associated with the message.

Only after such inquiries can media be understood in a global context. Students are asked to abandon their preconceived notions of media, and embrace perspectives they hear, no matter how foreign or different. By working to deconstruct media stereotypes and to abandon passive consumption of media students can become engaged global citizens: respectful of cultural diversity, critical of media abuses, and empowered to become active civic participants.
the salzburg academy on media and global change

For three weeks every summer, more than fifty students and a dozen faculty from fifteen universities worldwide gather to explore media’s role in global citizenship and civil society. The primary outcome of the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change is a student-created curriculum on Global Media Literacy. This curriculum is founded on the notion that global citizenship and responsibility require individuals to have an understanding of media’s necessary role in society and an awareness of the ways in which media influences cultural ideologies both locally and globally.

Through the creation of multimedia “lesson plans” that investigate media’s role in global society, the participants at the Salzburg Academy enter into cross-cultural dialogue that, at its core, reflects new understandings of media from diverse perspectives. The lesson plans are created by a global community for a global community. Students work in supranational groups with faculty supervision to create case studies around issues in the media, such as the Mohammed cartoon controversy and media censorship, the Iraq War and embedded journalism, and bloggers in China and their freedom of expression—that reflect a global approach to the topic. When students from different backgrounds collaborate to create case studies around these issues, they are able to think about media in ways that emphasize common understanding and shared perspectives. Enabling such dialogue is the core of global media literacy.
The Academy’s curricular pursuits are premised on a new model for global media literacy, one that emphasizes flexibility, representation, and inclusiveness. Developed as the “5 A’s of media literacy,” the framework aims to provide people with a common platform for exploring how media defines cultural stereotypes and classifies ideologies worldwide.

the 5 A’s of media literacy

The 5 A’s of media literacy framework offers a unique foundation for exploring how media can bridge cultural, political, and ideological divides. Students who are able to engage with global media around the 5 A’s—access to media, awareness of media’s power, assessment of how media cover international and supranational events and issues, appreciation for media’s role in creating civil societies, and action to encourage better communication across cultural, social, and political divides—can develop habits of inquiry around how media defines issues on a global scale.

The “5 A’s” enable a continuum starting with an understanding that there is no democratic society without access to information, and concluding with the idea that in today’s hypermedia environment, we all have the ability to be active participants in global communities.

access
The most fundamental necessity for a global media literacy framework is to acknowledge that without access to information, a democratic society would cease to exist in its current form. As the rise of new media technologies have allowed for increased media penetration into all facets of global society, access to information has become central to individual rights.

Levels of access differ from nation to nation; however, fundamental questions about media access are relevant on a global scale: Where does the information originate? Who owns the information? Who controls access to information? What are the barriers to access? How have new media technologies altered the type of access individuals have to information?

From access as a basic human right to how barriers to access affect cultural stereotypes—Academy students use such questions to find common ways to talk about media access in different parts of the world. These conversations provide a way to connect distinct cultural attributes with representations in the media. Students compare media ownership models in China and the U.S., internet controls in Pakistan and Argentina, and media diversity in Lebanon and South Africa, to explore how different levels of access to information dictate how much we know about other cultures.

**awareness**

As individuals, we are often bound by ideological, cultural, and geographical limitations. As societies become more connected through globalizing economies and politics, media
becomes the definer of cultures and often serves as the only window into how we view other parts of the world.

In this context, to be aware of media’s power is to understand the perspective from which all media messages are created. What are the larger contexts in which media messages are constructed? How can we be aware of the representations media cultivate? How do media messages affect values? What are the limitations to understanding global culture through media?

If access is the fundamental entry point for a global media literacy framework, awareness is the contextual foundation. At the Salzburg Academy, students cultivate an awareness of the multiple dialogues that accompany media messages. When students from China and the U.S. work together to build case studies around Tibet, a new dialogue emerges. Through shared perspectives, they quickly realize the viewpoints excluded from their personal media experiences. As a result, students are forced to consider new interpretations of the situation, and find a common point within which to explore the issue.

Media literacy emphasizes active inquiry as a cornerstone of its critical purview. In a global framework, this inquiry must be accompanied by an acknowledgement of the true complexity of information far removed from geographic familiarity. Being aware of the larger global context of media messages can allow for mutual understanding about the cultural values associated with information at its very point of origination.
assessment

All media messages, beyond context, are bound to a specific perspective. They are created by a specific organization or group, within a platform and with a certain audience in mind. The details in creating messages often define the scope, angle, and theme of the information presented. Whether on war, climate change, or entertainment, media messages in specific countries will adhere to an agenda, often dictated by the political, social, and ideological systems in place.

Assessing messages in a global media literacy context entails deconstructing specific messages to better understand how lifestyles, values, and viewpoints are developed within the message. *What is the purpose of the message? Who is the audience? What sources are used to advance points? How accurate is the message? What information is being left out of the message?*

Through looking at how the 2005 Mohammed cartoon controversy was covered differently in the Middle East, Latin America, and the U.S., students begin to see the media’s influence on how an entire population’s view of an event begins with a simple construction of words. From the decision to publish the cartoons, to the choice of language used in reporting on them, analyzing the specific messages from various outlets shows how the tone, scope, and angle of the message often define the parameters within which an issue is viewed. As students explore these constructions, they begin to see patterns within the messages that shape consumers’ viewpoints and beliefs.
The diversity of voices in the new media environment represents an opportunity to learn more about different cultures than ever before. If media literacy is to become a relevant tool for global society, it must not only cultivate critical thinking skills effectively, but also teach about the necessity of vibrant, diverse and free media in global contexts.9

Such an approach to media education can lead to learning outcomes centered around understanding, engagement, and appreciation. What are the connections between media and civil society? How does freedom of expression help maintain democracy? What are the foundations for appreciating multiple perspectives through multiple voices? How can media enable tolerance?

The 5 A’s framework emphasizes the opportunities new media provides for global dialogue and cross-cultural appreciation. Academy students are taught to constantly seek the associations between media, culture, and perspective. They are asked to explore depictions of women in the media in the fifteen countries represented in Salzburg. What are the similarities and differences in how the women are portrayed? Is there diversity in the depictions? What does this mean for our understanding of women and media in a global context? Such approaches reveal the diverse sensitivities constructed through media.
Finding the connections between messages and the inherent perspectives they represent allow for a fuller understanding of the creator’s intentions and motivations. In this way, media can be seen beyond what it does wrong, what it does not do, and what it could do better. Appreciating media allows students to not only see the imperfections in the media environment, but to also recognize that media is often the only way we see the other.

action

Never before have there been so many avenues for active participation in global dialogue as there are now. Internet and new media technologies have enabled new means for media production and activism. Global media literacy must teach how such newfound avenues for expression can empower people to take action. *How can I use media to have a voice? What are the avenues for active participation in civil society? How much do I participate in the creation of cultural understanding, tolerance, and global progress? How can new media empower active and engaged citizenship?*

In Salzburg, students begin participating by creating educational content around global media literacy. This content is the result of an experience attempting to find the connections between media use and an understanding of global communities. As students prepare to take their experiences in Salzburg back to their homelands, they leave with an understanding of how to communicate effectively on a global level.

Media literacy often assumes that enhanced critical thinking will augment the amount of civic awareness and engaged participation in civil society. At the Salzburg Academy,
such a connection is not taken for granted. Students are asked, after creating content and contemplating all aspects of the 5 A’s framework, to think how their voices can help to raise cultural awareness and global media literacy.

**connecting culture through global media literacy**

The success of the 5 A’s framework hinges upon the re-conceptualization of traditional notions of media literacy for an increasingly global media environment. This entails providing students with the skills and motivation to understand media in its original context, and to understand and apply the tenets of global media literacy to one’s own situation, as well as to understand how different media messages are received and interpreted by those in other political, social, and cultural contexts. This involves thinking beyond borders, and beyond specific media, to understand the unique ways media define civil societies across the globe.

The new model for global media literacy developed at the Salzburg Academy aims to achieve two main outcomes: first, that students understand the value of critical thinking about media and; second, that students understand the vital importance of free media for building and supporting civil society and their (students) creating and supporting media as an essential exercise of global citizenship. In this way, the 5 A’s of media literacy represent a new way forward for empowerment and active participation in our global media age. The first step to empowerment is to connect the diverse and vibrant cultures through global media literacy.
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