

# **Challenges and Pathways for Pre-service Teacher Education in Critical Media Literacy**

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Thank you very much for joining my talk today.

In the culture where I currently live in the consideration of media literacy is recommended for all educational institutions including Kindergarten and Universities. Additionally, digital basic education was introduced as a dedicated school subject six weeks ago. Currently pre-service teacher education programs for the school subject are developed. So the political framework seems well set. But it is a political framework and thus charged with political interests and ideologies that cause challenges. I would like to illustrate these challenges by discussing two examples, a smaller one and a bigger challenge. Along the way I will add suggestions for pathways to tackle the challenges.

The small challenge is the confusion of media literacy and e-learning. Most politicians, businesspeople, and journalists are convinced that students are taught media literacy if they use digital media for learning. And as a result of communication in the public sphere this applies also to many teachers. But as you know, using digital media to learn languages or sciences does not lead to the an increase of media literacy. Instead, the

result of using digital media in e-learning is that students get used to computer technology. The message of doing e-learning this way is, that digital media itself guarantee the quality of teaching and learning and are thus valuable. By framing digital media as valuable, the acceptance of digital media is enforced.

We can assume that the acceptance of digital media is the goal of businesspeople and many politicians, since the assumption that digital media do improve learning has been falsified in hundreds of studies since the 1970ies. What students learn with e-learning is how to operate media. They are made servants of media, or, in more provocative terms, they are made media slaves. What is enforced this way is called cybernetic ideology in media pedagogy.

The core ideas of cybernetic ideology are that everything in the world - things, life and thinking - is information processing, that everything can be controlled by control loops and that the future can be predicted by analysing information. Typical expressions of this ideology are that computers can or might think and that artificial intelligence systems should control societies. The first idea is just stupid while the second one is actually dangerous since the only way to reach this goal is to adopt people to technology. And that is a goal that would drive any decent educator to despair.

It is not very difficult to tackle this issue in teacher training programs. Usually it is sufficient to introduce two terms: The first term is media, connected with the difference between teaching with media and teaching about media. This is usually understood intuitively. The second term is media literacy. With media literacy we discuss teaching about media. This includes the reflection of media and the use of media for one's own purposes.

To teach the reflection of media, it is necessary to convey concepts. Cybernetic ideology is one example for that. Agenda setting, media convergence or the public sphere are other ones. To teach how to use media for

one's own purposes it is first necessary to ask people to develop goals they want to reach with media, it is second necessary to show them how to design a media environment that meets their goals and it is third necessary to show them how to use media for participating in public debates. It is no coincidence that own goals and public debates are not mentioned in the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills concept of the OECD. But they are mentioned in UNESCO's Media- and Information Literacy program. So the first challenge can be tackled by rejecting the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and referring to UNESCO's MIL concept.

The second challenge is that hardly anybody in the culture I live in has an idea of the meaning of the term critical media literacy, and I would like to demonstrate that by doing a little critical reflection of media. The example I choose for that is fake news. What most politicians, businesspeople and journalists suggest is that teachers should teach students how to spot fake news. Let's take a critical look at that. What happens when you do that?

By teaching how to spot fake news, politicians, businesspeople and journalists turn the problem of fake news into a personal problem: Students are made responsible for solving the problem. They should bear the costs and the risks. If there are costs and risks, we can assume there's profit too. But who's ranking in the profit?

Fake news are there for a simple reason. Fake news are a proven way to generate attention. And attention is the raw material of data capitalism. With means of production like data mining tools, this raw material can be turned into products. These products can be sold to generate profit. This profit is taken by only a few private persons. The profits are privatized while the costs are generalized.

So – if we teach students how to identify fake news, we enforce the acceptance of the business model of tech companies. This business model is based on generalizing costs and privatising profits - a scheme that market fetishists like to use to maximize profits. In humanities, this structure

is understood as capitalistic ideology. And the capitalist ideology is based on a certain concept of private property.

Teaching this problem to pre-service teachers in such a way that they can teach it later on is a great challenge. This is because the concept of private property has been so deeply anchored in people's minds, especially with the help of commercial media in general and digital media in particular, that most people cannot even begin to imagine a different view.

This challenge can be tackled with a similar strategy as the first one. But in this case, it is more promising to start with practice. Teaching pre-service teachers how to set up a media environment they can control themselves and teaching them how to deploy that environment in their community for political communication is a good starting point, since it offers evidence for the argument that a responsible, humane use of media is possible.

After that, they can connect terms like Californian ideology and data religion to their experiences much easier. Californian ideology is a term introduced by Barebrook and Cameron in 1995 for the integration of capitalist ideology and cybernetic ideology by means of new age thinking that actually drives the owners of Alphabet, Apple, Amazon, Meta and Microsoft. Data religion is a religion first extensively advocated by Harari in 2015, and can be understood as an evolution of the Californian ideology.

When teachers master these terms, they can opt for alternative practices. They become able to creatively shape their media environment for teaching and learning. And this includes the option to just avoid any contact with digital media – even in the classroom.

To conclude: From a pedagogical point of view that puts people in the center, it is necessary to teach terms that are suitable for reflecting media and it is necessary to probe practices for the self-determined and creative use of media in pre-service teacher education. Thank you for your attention.