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Editors' Introduction: Critical Media Literacy - Who Needs It?

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Editors' introduction: Critical media literacy – who needs it?

Harry Browne and Deborah Brennan

The articles in this volume of Irish Communications Review shared the stage at 'Critical Media Literacy: Who Needs It?', the first conference of the Centre for Critical Media Literacy (CCML) at Dublin Institute of Technology, in October 2017. While that buzzing, occasionally fractious event is not comprehensively represented here – we're without Richard Barbrook's provocative keynote presentation, in the presence of a senior Facebook representative, boasting about how Jeremy Corbyn's supporters hacked social media; or David Buckingham's critical take on the uses and abuses of media-literacy policy; or two dozen other papers – these articles do give a sense of the range and relevance of the work that was presented there.

Much has been written and spoken about the increased salience of media literacy, and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland has recently midwived a network of interested parties called Media Literacy Ireland. Words like 'Brexit' and 'Trump' are rarely far from the surface of such media-literacy discussion, and the talk tends to be accompanied by (perhaps excessively) media-centric explanations for alarming political phenomena, from the role of Fox News and British tabloids to the horrors of data analytics and online micro-targeting. While

no academic event reflecting on media literacy could or should be immune to contemporary concerns – especially when, like our conference, it sets out to include political activists and media practitioners – it is hoped that the CCML and its activities and effusions do not merely reflect such fashions but also are prepared to critique them. Indeed, as Buckingham’s work demonstrates, a truly critical media literacy can and must analyse the deployment of ‘media literacy’ itself as policy and panacea. Simplistic notions of media literacy as a sort of inoculation campaign to protect young people and other media users against a plague of fake news and filter bubbles should themselves be objects of sceptical investigation and research.

The critical media literacy work contained in this volume, however, represents our more fundamental task: to ask and answer, in accessible and inclusive ways, all sorts of questions about media, using all sorts of analytical tools, and to do so in ways that invites participation from disciplines outside the traditional realm of ‘media and communications’. In the short time that the CCML has existed, its meetings have brought together DIT scholars from areas as diverse as journalism and marketing, computer science and theoretical physics, software engineering and gaming; and there is regular participation, too, from the institute’s library. This diversity is reflected in the conference and in these papers gathered from it, where legal and historical research sit beside critical political economy of media, data analytics and computation studies. This volume, we are proud to say, is genuinely interdisciplinary. It should also point the way to future collaborative research that is more ‘transdisciplinary’, a term that suggests more crossing and moving. We are less certain and remain to be convinced by the buzz around ‘antidisciplinarity’: our work in shepherding this volume through the process of peer review has reminded us that boundaries of expertise and discipline are real and important – they cannot and should not be wished away in an understandable effort to transcend narrowness and jargon.

The 2017 CCML conference was international, with speakers and papers from Britain and Finland as well as Ireland, and while we hope future events bring more of the same, we’re happy to offer a selection here of work from Irish-based researchers, albeit work that more often than not engages with a world beyond these shores. In some cases we publish a first or early publication from researchers who are only beginning their scholarly explorations.

The first three articles in the volume critically address concerns traditionally associated with the field of media literacy. Clare Scully and Isabelle Courtney both offer research on media literacy education, with Scully's paper reflecting on importance of discipline and curriculum-specific 'literacy' pedagogy for media students, and Courtney examining what the idea of information literacy in library studies can offer journalism educators in the context of worries about misinformation in media. Adrian Smyth, meanwhile, offers early-stage data from his research on how seniors may embrace, and decline, the attractions of digital media.

There follows a series of articles that engage directly, albeit in very different ways, with social and online media. Cáitríona Murphy's work on affective networking is a theoretically oriented effort to unpack the ideas and realities of the creation of economic value on social-networking sites, focussing on certain forms of content creation as unpaid labour from which value is extracted. Marisa Llorens Salvador, on the other hand, examines how text-analytics algorithms may help the researcher extract meaning from large amounts of online data by 'understanding' concepts and relationships between words. Jerome Casey breaks down a real-world case-study of using text analytics in the digital world by studying text from US TV broadcasts dealing with climate change. Jason Deegan and colleagues offer a comparative study of Israeli and Palestinian presentation of identity online by contrasting the Twitter accounts of the Israeli defence forces and a Palestine-solidarity organisation.

Of course one thing we have learned from recent events is that under 'surveillance capitalism' social-networking platforms care less about the content we create online than the fact that we are there producing data through our presence and interactions. Sarah Kearney's article on the Irish data-protection regime is up to date, with insights into how the General Data Protection Regulation, introduced throughout the European Union in May 2018, interacts with Irish law and jurisprudence in this area.

The next two articles remind us that whatever the law may say, the technology giants that dominate our media and communicative environments – especially but not exclusively Google – have enormous and emergent capacities that give them potential power that is difficult to exaggerate. Deborah Brennan looks at internet security and how the emerging, though still theoretically debated,

paradigm of quantum computation could further centralise communication and data management under very few large corporate umbrellas. Gerry Heapes asks if Google's technology can be said to be self-aware, and if we are prepared as societies and as scholars to deal with the forms of intelligence to which we attach the adjective 'artificial'.

Clíodhha Pierce and Ann Curran take us, by varying routes, into 20th-century worlds of surveillance, repression and terror that did not rely on digital technology for their effect. Pierce examines in detail the surveillance practices of two contrasting states, the former East German regime and the British security apparatus in Northern Ireland. Curran looks at Belgian artist and filmmaker Sven Augustijnen, whose work over two decades excavates the horrific history of his country's colonial role, with intriguing shadows in Ireland.

The final two articles in this volume constitute the most familiar ICR content, insofar as they consist of detailed content analysis of the treatment of important and highly contested contemporary issues in what continue to be called 'legacy media'. Barry Finnegan looks at the deployment of 'experts' in coverage of, and commentary about, international trade agreements in three Irish national newspapers – and how that may or may not conform to expectations about neoliberal bias. Jenny Hauser's paper looks at how three major international broadcasters sourced content from 'citizen journalists' in Aleppo as part of their coverage of the Syrian war, and at what constitutes an authoritative source when reporters are scarce on the ground, but activists are not.

This diverse offering from a range of committed scholars represents a first effort at producing ICR, happily now an online and open-access journal, under the auspices of the Centre for Critical Media Literacy. As the joint co-ordinators of that centre, and joint editors of this volume, we offer it to readers in the hope of many more to come.