

# Inspiration and motivation: The similarities and differences between critical and acritical media literacy

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*This article addresses the theoretical and practical differences between acritical and critical media literacy as researched and practiced by United States'-based scholars. Drawing from the top-cited authors in the field of media literacy, the authors share their analysis of the similarities and differences in pedagogical approaches. Attention is paid to gaps in critical media literacy research and further research needed.*

**Keywords:** Critical Media Literacy, Curriculum; Learning Outcomes, and Learning Opportunities

“Media literacy isn’t just critical thinking. It’s critical” reads a March 2019 tweet from the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE). The statement used the word ‘critical’ in two separate ways: As a description of a thinking process and as a testament to the importance of media literacy. What’s missing from this statement is a third use of the word ‘critical:’ A framework of analysis.

Following the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Brexit referendum, and Cambridge Analytica scandal there was increased concern about the power of media to influence public perception of politics and electoral outcomes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018). In response, there have been calls for solutions, including government regulation of social media, and private industry-designed programs that delineate false content from journalism for users and censor individuals and ideologies associated with fake news (Higdon, 2020). In these contentious political times, news and information evaluation receive heightened attention, however, in the broad arena of media awareness, the need for greater depth of analysis and understanding goes well beyond news. Rather than empower a government or private industry to decide best media practices, concerned scholars instead point to media literacy, an umbrella term that encompasses and draws from many areas of study, including civic engagement, digital literacy, multiliteracies, political economy, and literacy studies.

Despite decades of pleas for the adoption of media literacy education in American schooling (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Meehan, Ray, Walker, Wells, & Schwarz, 2015), it is barely offered to students. Since 2016, many states have explored legislation that advocates for media literacy inclusion in K-12 classrooms (Higdon & Boyington, 2019). However, some of the legislation lacks a funding mechanism or direct plan for implementation, and much of it suffers from crucial gaps in teacher education, defined implementation processes, concrete student learning outcomes, and a clear articulation of media literacy. For example, some states have required a narrow slice of media literacy, such as California’s addition of arts and sex trafficking education with a media literacy component, and those that require only digital and social media literacy, such as Texas, Virginia, New Jersey, and Utah (Media Literacy Now, 2020). The legislation ranges from requiring the implementation of media literacy standards, in states such as New York, Minnesota, Florida, Ohio, and Massachusetts, to creating committees to examine media literacy in states such as Colorado and Rhode Island. Similarly, states such as New Mexico and Washington have prioritized portions of their budget for professional development in media literacy for educators (Media Literacy Now, 2020). Although the legislation represents a step forward, their success is largely dependent upon effective media literacy research and scholarship addressing the legislative gaps. However, for decades the scholarship on media literacy has been engaged in a theoretical debate with little attention paid to the study of effective praxis (Hobbs, 1998, 2011; Potter, 2010; Yousman, 2016).

It is our contention that in order to identify and implement effective media literacy pedagogy, it is necessary for scholars to move beyond the theoretical debate and focus instead on the work of building sound pedagogy. Part of the issue is that media literacy scholars have engaged in a decades long debate about the proper categorization of pedagogical approaches to media literacy education.

Some scholars categorize the approaches into two camps of “empowerment” versus “protectionism” (RobbGrieco & Hobbs, 2013, p.1), while others argue that there are four approaches to media literacy: Protectionist; media arts education, the media literacy movement, and critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2007). The competing categorizations have not elucidated the differing aspects of each approach, nor have they clarified if practitioners adopt one approach for all pedagogical situations. Further complicating the media literacy scholarship is waning consensus about some of the key terms in the field. For example, when it comes to the ‘critical’ in critical media literacy, some define it as an “ideological agenda” (Hobbs, 1998, p.4), but others argue that it refers to a pedagogical approach that “challenges relativist and apolitical notions of much media education in order to guide teachers and students in their explorations of how power, media, and information are linked” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p.8). Similarly, there is disagreement among media literacy scholars about what it means to be objective. Critical scholars argue that the media scholars who reject a critical approach to media education, known as acritical scholars, conflate their ideological bias with objectivity (Kellner & Share, 2019). Conversely, acritical scholars accuse critical scholars of dismissing a pursuit of objectivity in the classroom for their ideological dogma (Hobbs, 1998).

The divisions among media literacy scholars have been exacerbated by dichotomous debates over funding. Critical scholars insinuate that acritical scholars are willfully blind to the ways in which their approach normalizes media companies’ hegemony because they and their affiliated organizations, such as NAMLE, MediaWise, and NewsGuard, accept funding from those very same corporations (Bindig & Castonguay, 2014; Higdon & Boyington, 2019; Jhally & Earp, 2003) such as Channel One, Facebook, Google, Nickelodeon, and Twitter (Heins & Cho, 2003; NAMLE, 2019). Acritical scholars dismiss critical scholars’ contention as a naiveté that hinders the advancement of media literacy by discounting the ways in which media corporations have been “significant player[s] in advancing the media literacy competencies of citizens” by raising “visibility” of the field (Hobbs, 2016, p.141). Scholars interested in, and new to, media literacy and classroom teachers looking to infuse media literacy in their classrooms unwittingly run the risk of getting mired into these debates before they are fully comfortable with the material. This potential quagmire limits productive work in implementing and, by extension, further hinders progress in media literacy education, putting schools, classrooms, teachers, and students even further behind in a rapidly changing media environment.

The purpose of this article is to delineate the theoretical and curricular similarities and differences between critical and acritical approaches to media literacy education in the United States. As media literacy scholars, we are asked consistently about the similarities and differences by practitioners. We think a clear understanding of the various approaches will provide a clearer path for scholars and classroom teachers interested in entering, and advancing, the field. As a result, we are not seeking to create dichotomies or promote one approach over another. Rather, we are assessing where there is overlap and difference in the approaches to media education. The authors recognize that this is but a slice of the media literacy work being done around the globe; because our own research is located in the United States, we limit our scope to one nation for this paper. We see this study as the first piece of a multi-faceted approach to media literacy that explores and delineates theoretical and practical approaches in both higher education and K-12 practice.

## **A brief overview of (critical) media literacy education's history**

Much to the chagrin of the policy makers and practitioners seeking to identify and implement effective media literacy curriculum, 'media literacy' is not well defined (Butler, 2020). In order to implement media literacy into curricula, both 'media literacy' and 'curriculum' need greater clarification. Curriculum refers to learning outcomes, learning opportunities, content, topics, skills, materials, and organization (Applebee, 2008; Donlan, Loughlin, & Byrne, 2019). Practitioners rely on sound curriculum to determine effective pedagogy (Applebee, 2008). Policy makers are equally dependent on sound curriculum. They cannot articulate let alone implement effective media literacy standards without a clearer picture of what media literacy *is* and the multiple ways it has been studied and articulated.

Despite the quantity of media produced in and exported from the United States, the nation came late to codifying and concretizing a definition – and subsequent practice – of media literacy. Many years before the United States grew interested in developing media literacy practice, scholars across the globe were concerned about the relationship between media and audiences, specifically youth audiences. Outside of the U.S., nations such as Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and several Asian countries began regularly offering media education to their own students several decades ago (Cheung, 2009; Hobbs & Frost, 2003). A meeting of concerned media and education scholars and practitioners in 1992 concluded with the following definition of media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication” (Aufderheide, 1993, p.6). The decentralized nature of the U.S. education system, which empowers states rather than the federal government to shape the majority of education policy, stunted the adoption and implementation of any national media literacy standards.

There are four accepted approaches to media literacy: Protectionist; media arts education, the media literacy movement, and critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2007). The first three, although concurrent and conflicting at times, represent the acritical approaches to media literacy. The protectionist approach derived from concerns over audiences' relationship to media content and effect following the moral panics over propaganda during World War II and the succeeding *War of the World's* controversy (Hobbs & McGee, 2014). Protectionism still persists (Turkle, 2016) as form of education designed as an inoculation against the perceived dangerous effects of media. It offered rigid interpretations of high and low culture texts such as the dismissal of comic books, pop music, and television programs and a preference for classical literature (Potter, 2010). In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, educators conceived a new approach to media education, media arts education, which offered appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of media and encouraged student engagement in self-expression through media production (Kellner & Share, 2007). Just like the protectionist approach it succeeded, the media arts education approach had a negotiated view that defined pornography, violent films, and graphic lyrics as 'bad' and educational shows or films as 'good' (Potter, 2010). Following the growth of media studies as a field, a third approach to media literacy, the media literacy movement, developed as an accepted academic practice, where educators utilized and accepted the pleasure students derived from media. The approach sought to expand the field into multiple literacies, including print and digital (Kellner & Share, 2007). Advocates argued that connecting school content with the shows, music, and movies students enjoyed offered educators a crucial means of student engagement that helped develop creative and analytical skills (Hobbs & Coiro, 2018).

Critical media literacy (CML) developed outside of the previous lineage. CML draws its theoretical concepts from the wider and considerably deeper realms of critical theory and cultural studies, such as the Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools (Kellner & Share, 2019). Morrell (2008) traces this lineage from the time of Plato through Kant, Adorno, DuBois, and a wide range of other key philosophers and critical scholars. CML draws its educational approach primarily through critical pedagogy, a field that emerged from the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970), which rejects the banking model of education as a top-down instructional approach that stifles student voice and personal growth (Kellner & Share, 2009). With its interpretive approach, focus on emancipation, and cultural studies tradition, CML is rooted in a different epistemological tradition than the protective or celebratory approaches, especially evident in this regard is its concern with the relationship between media and power (Kellner & Share 2007). As a result, critical media literacy scholars explore considerations of race, class, gender, and other cultural forces necessary to process how media inform and, in turn, reinforce, these discourses and reinforce cultural norms (Morrell, 2008). A critical approach to media literacy goes beyond content analysis to explore how power, ideology, and sociocultural context shape media messages and representations (Jhally & Earp, 2003; Kellner & Share, 2007).

As the public works toward effective media literacy standards and practices, critical and acritical scholars have largely offered theoretical positions while critiquing other approaches. Over two decades ago, Hobbs (1998) referred to critical scholars' approach to media literacy as one that advocates for an "ideological agenda" at the expense of serving "a wide variety of ideological positions" (4). In the ensuing decades, she would narrowly define the critical approach to media education as tantamount to 'media bashing' (Hobbs, 1998, 2019; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Critical scholars contend that the conflation of critical inquiry with media bashing is rooted in acritical scholars' dogmatic belief in "the myth that education can and should be politically neutral, and that their job is to objectively expose students to media content without questioning ideology and issues of power" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p.8). Similarly, Yousman (2016) accuses acritical scholars of having a "profound reticence, if not outright fear of the term 'critical'" (p. 370). These discourses are useful in staking out theoretical positionality, but they do little in terms of providing policy makers and practitioners with the most effective approach for media literacy education. Indeed, there does not seem to be a coherent curriculum map for any approach to media literacy let alone a consensus about the most effective curricular approach to media literacy.

### **Methodology and framework**

We use a curriculum mapping framework of the available literature to determine what pedagogical similarities and differences exist between acritical and critical media literacy education. Curriculum mapping posits that the curricular structure of a course (Driscoll & Wood, 2007), program (Uchiyama & Radin, 2009), or discipline (Stivers & Phillips, 2009) is illuminated through an analysis of the educators' scaffolding and learning outcomes (Cuevas, Matveev, & Feit, 2009).

Our findings focus on identifying the different approaches taken by critical and acritical scholars regarding learning outcomes, learning opportunity, and content (Harden, 2001). In this study, course content refers to the topics, skills, materials, and organization that an instructor includes in the class (Donlan, Loughlin, & Byrne, 2019). Learning outcomes are the desired skills and abilities

students will exhibit upon completion of the course. We have chosen Sowell's (1979) definition of "a learning opportunity," which is "a designed situation to assist the student in practicing the desired behavior" (p.16).

Our analysis is based on a review of the top cited media literacy authors' publications. We used Publish or Perish software, which collects, categorizes, and analyzes academic citations, considering a paper's total number of citations; the average citations per paper and author; the amount of papers published by an author; Hirsch's h-index; Egghe's g-index; the contemporary h-index; h-indices; the age-weighted citation rate; and the number of authors per paper, to identify the authors of the five most cited studies in each discipline. We chose the top five from each scholarly branch of U.S. media literacy (See Table 1) because the citation of their work indicates their impact on the study of media literacy education. The five most cited acritical scholars are W. James Potter, Kathleen Tyner, Renee Hobbs, Julie Coiro, and Art Silverblatt. The five most cited critical media literacy authors are Donna Alvermann, Margaret Hagood, Douglas Kellner, Jeff Share, and Ernest Morrell. Using all that was available in our university database, we performed a comprehensive literature review of each of the ten authors and applied curriculum mapping to their studies.

## **Findings**

Our findings illuminate how the critical and acritical media literacy educators approach decisions about content, learning outcomes, and learning opportunities for the theoretical development of the field as well as how they envision and/or practice its application in K-12 classroom spaces. Although there are some crucial differences between the two approaches, there is much overlap. Mostly, acritical scholars put more limits on content and fewer outcomes and opportunities in their courses as compared to critical media literacy scholars.

## **Content**

Critical and acritical media literacy scholars agree that media texts -which are media products such as magazines, newspapers, and films- constitute crucial content for their courses, but they disagree on how they should be introduced to students. For example, supporters for both approaches contend that media content such as pro-wrestling (Alvermann, Huddleston, & Hagood, 2004) and digital tools (Hobbs & Coiro, 2019) in the classroom have a positive impact on student learning in the form of increased student engagement. However, they diverge on the political neutrality of these texts and tools.

Critical and acritical media literacy scholars disagree on the political neutrality of media and education. For acritical scholars like Silverblatt (1997), media are politically neutral because "newspapers, television, and so on, merely provide a channel through which a communicator can reach his or her audience" (p.288). For critical media literacy scholars, there is no neutrality of media that operates 'outside' of political influence. As Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood (2018) note, "reading popular culture is never an innocent act. Identity and desire are inherently bound in the politics of such texts" (p.140).

Hobbs (1998, 2019) is perhaps the most outspoken critic of critical scholars' contention that media are political. Hobbs (2010) claims that the expansion of media literacy programs to a greater number of school programs is dependent upon media educators adopting an objective viewpoint of media because any indication of political preference would only serve to deny financial opportunities to ally with lucrative corporate entities. Further, Hobbs and Jensen (2009) view critical scholars' approach to media education as "push[ing] their political agendas onto students" (p.4). Critical scholars counter that it is acritical scholars are all mistaken when they claim to be objective because all education is political, and all media have bias. They contend that notions of neutrality or objectivity are usually aligned with the dominant hegemonic ideologies (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016). The corporate bias only seems 'natural' or 'normal' because their dominant perspective goes unnamed (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016).

### **Learning outcomes**

In addition to the disagreements over content, media literacy scholars disagree on the learning outcomes of effective media literacy education. Both approaches agree that effective media education builds multiple literacies and legitimizes students' intellectual autonomy and independence. However, acritical scholars adopt a psychological approach to media education while critical scholars encourage students to take a sociological approach to media (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016) They differ in recognition of a Gramscian understanding of ideology. Critical theories recognize ideological hierarchies of power that influence everything and everyone through dominant systems, structures, and epistemologies (such as patriarchy, white supremacy, colorism, heteronormativity, consumerism, neoliberalism, etc.). Many acritical folks dismiss the importance of these or disagree with them.

From the beginnings of the field in the early 1960s, acritical scholars have been interested in not only building literacy skills with media, but in developing aptitude in media understanding. For Silverblatt (1997) and Potter (2004), reading the media is a process of analyzing cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and moral impressions. The goal for both student and citizen alike is to "make up your own mind about issues" (Silverblatt, 1997, p.2). It is the job of the media consumer (and the instructor) to develop a careful understanding of the media industry itself, the psychological impacts that media texts can have on ourselves and others, and how we can navigate the plethora of media available to us to find accurate information (Potter, 2004). Agreeing with the general goals of developing message comprehension, writing, and critical-thinking skills, Coiro et al. (2014) stress the need to rework these concepts to fit within an online context. For Coiro (2003), Tyner (2007), and many other media scholars, these new literacies are known as multiliteracies, which include the ability to read, write, and comprehend content in a range of media forms.

Critical media scholars share acritical scholars' focus on developing multiliteracies, but argue that it should be accompanied by critical inquiry. Critical scholars view the development of new literacies as a way for students to speak back to social forces, offering the opportunity for a democratic reconstruction of education and society (Kellner & Share, 2007). Alvermann (2017) warns that the "failure to reflect critically on the contexts in which a pedagogy of multiliteracies exists (or any pedagogy, for that matter) can lead to unquestioningly reproducing the cultural values of the most powerful, often at the expense of the students we teach" (p.101). The process of 'reading' the media should be presented to students as a way to "construct their knowledge of

the world and the various social, economic, and political positions they occupy within it” (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, pp.1-2).

Both approaches cite student empowerment as a learning outcome, but disagree on its extent and purpose. Acritical media literacy scholars advocate for empowering students with hands-on media experiences (Tyner, 2007) that enable students to autonomously make choices and interpretations of media (Potter, 2004, 2010). Critical media literacy scholars seek to foster student empowerment as liberation from the hegemony of dominant media messages (Kellner & Share, 2009). Alvermann and Hagood (2000) are quick to note that despite the potential of this pedagogy, students are not required to “conform to some image of political liberation nor even that they resist, but simply that they gain some understanding of their own involvement in the works, and in the making of their own future” (p.2). Similarly, Morrell (2008) notes that critical media literacy is “essential to the redefining of the self and the transformation of oppressive social structures and relations of production” (p.5).

### **Learning opportunities**

Both approaches agree that the introduction of media content presents an opportunity for students to learn about the production process. However, the approaches disagree on the placement of media education in the curriculum, the goals of these exercises, and how to address the pleasure students derive from media in the classroom.

There is disagreement among scholars about where media literacy learning opportunities should be in the curriculum. Both approaches agree that the introduction of media content in the classroom creates an opportunity for discussing questions about content and production (Potter, 2004, 2010) as well as the larger contexts outside the classroom (Coiro, 2003; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). Both approaches agree that there should be courses dedicated solely to media literacy education. However, they disagree on how to add media literacy to current curriculum. Tyner (2003) claims that “an injection” of media into existing curricula is naïve because it leaves “little breathing room for reflective, inquiry-based, student-driven, and experimental processes” (p.380). Critical scholars argue that an effective and innovative critical media literacy education can be added to existing curricula with a student-centered approach to teaching. Alvermann, Huddleston and Hagood (2004) recommend that rather than let technology or top-down critiques of media dictate class materials, invite students to bring popular culture texts to the classroom. Similarly, critical scholars contend that by adopting a Freirean model of teaching, educators can facilitate an inquiry-based, student-driven learning education model (Kellner & Share, 2007).

Both approaches agree that media production presents crucial learning opportunities, but they disagree on the purpose of these exercises. Acritical scholars contend that media production assignments that require students to “create and share reports, webpages, or digital presentations” (Coiro, 2003, p.463) serve to develop student empowerment and professional development skills. These scholars contend that media literacy skills and media production exercises exist mainly to celebrate technical skills and open up employment opportunities for students (Coiro, 2003; Hobbs, 2005). This is in stark contrast with critical scholars who view media production assignments as an opportunity to challenge power inequities (Morrell, 2008) and further democracy (Kellner & Share, 2007). This model of media production is a transformative process where students engage



with public media problem solving projects to increase their civic engagement and participation, while developing their media production skills and knowledge of the production process (Kellner & Share 2007). Acritical media literacy scholars oppose problem-posing pedagogy arguing that it is unethical. Hobbs (2009) views critical media literacy's approach as "push[ing] their political agendas onto students, offering their critique of capitalism as gospel and orchestrating student 'voice' in a mandated form of 'service learning' coercively enrolling students into a political action project, telling them what to think instead of encouraging them to think for themselves" (p.4).

There is an internal debate among acritical scholars about how to address the pleasure students derive from media. For the protectionist wing of acritical scholars, media are to be viewed suspiciously. To find pleasure in a media text is to open oneself up to potentially dangerous encoded messages, especially in the case of violent or sexually explicit content (Potter, 2004). Media literacy skills make it possible to overcome these effects, allowing one "to build the life that you want rather than letting the media build the life *they* want for you" (Potter, 2004, p.xi, emphasis in original). Conversely, Hobbs (2011b) argues students of media literacy should not be treated as passive receivers to be protected from potentially harmful media. Instead, media literacy channels the pleasure students feel from video, audio, and other multimodal content in order to engage them with educational concepts (Hobbs, 2009).

As compared to acritical scholars, critical media literacy scholars have a much clearer position on addressing the pleasure students derive from media. They frame pleasure not as something to be feared or celebrated, but as an educational starting point. As Alvermann and Hagood (2000) note, the purpose of critical media literacy should be to explore pleasure in order to uncover new and different forms of enjoyment. Critical media literacy pushes students to observe the often complicated relationship they have to popular culture, mixing enjoyment with wider ranging political, social, and cultural critiques. By understanding what is attractive about these texts in the first place, students may consider ways to recreate these representations through their own alternate texts (Kellner & Share, 2009).

### **Assessment Tools**

Despite the sizable debate between the two approaches on other aspects of curriculum, they share relatively scant research on assessment techniques for media literacy education. Media literacy scholars tend to agree that there is a lack of literature on properly assessing students in their discipline (Butler, 2010, 2020; Christ & Potter, 1998; Coiro, 2003). This isn't for lack of trying; Hobbs (2003), Literat (2014) and many other literacy scholars have developed possible assessment methods. However, many cite the nature of U.S. education, which allows local governments to set standards, and the limits of traditional measurements of student success, such as reading comprehension, as hindering the development of ubiquitous assessment tools (Coiro, 2003). K-12 and higher education scholars are in a difficult bind: While they may see the value of incorporating (critical) media literacy, making the case for its efficacy is still difficult without clear markers of success and competence. Ultimately, both approaches must be able to recognize that, no matter which approach is adopted, youth participants may reject or resist *all* efforts.

Both approaches agree that students should complete media production assignments that assess students' skills. Acritical scholars argue that media literacy courses must assess students based on a series of literacies, where students demonstrate an "ability to continuously adapt to the new

literacies required by the new technologies that rapidly and continuously spread on the Internet” (2008, Coiro, p.5). The best methodology for assessing these skills remains ambiguous in the literature. In response, Hobbs (2011) has called for media scholars to “assess learning progression through online assessment tools and careful video documentation of best practices for digital and media literacy instructional strategies” (p.17).

Similar to acritical scholars, critical scholars have little consensus on effective assessment tools for their pedagogy. However, unlike acritical scholars, critical media literacy educators see the introduction of media texts to the classroom as an opportunity to break out of established educational approaches rather than help refine existing assessment tools. Morrell (2002) advocates for alternate forms of assessment than established standardized testing and ‘skill-development’ measurements, offering student-led projects such as group video projects and community research as a more effective means of assessing student literacy development. However, what these methods are and their effectiveness remain ambiguous in the scholarly literature. Indeed, although critical and acritical media literacy are taught in the U.S., there are no universally agreed upon assessment tools, or clear connections between the assessment tools and outcomes found in the literature.

### **Discussion and next steps**

Our literature scan revealed distinct theoretical and practical differences between the two approaches. When it comes to content, learning opportunities, and learning outcomes, both approaches have carved out well-stated positions. Critical scholars advocate a critical framework to be applied to analysis of content while acritical scholars find this problematic. Instead, they argue for a neutral approach to education that critical scholars contend is impossible. In another striking difference, critical scholars rely on the problem-posing models of Freire in their courses which acritical scholars not only dismiss, but oppose on ethical grounds.

The two approaches are not as distinct as they appear. Both agree that a diverse range of media content should be included in a media literacy course. They also share minimal research when it comes to assessment tools. Scholars of both approaches have yet to produce a universally accepted methodology for demonstrating that students have learned the desired outcomes. This makes the case for the need for further study, while it also illustrates how the debate about ideology and the politicizing of the classroom has been a fruitful distraction from engaging the *work* of media literacy. The question looms for both approaches: What does a media literate person look like? How does a media literate person work with (or against) corporate and independent media?

Our findings also create new concerns about the scholarship for both approaches. The evidence we do have reveals a class and racial bias that surely influences the pedagogical effectiveness of each approach. All but one of the top-cited authors are white (as are the authors of this piece). Although there is a relatively fair gender breakdown among the top-cited scholars, this begs questions about whether the scholarship on these approaches is culturally sensitive, or one that relies on generalities to serve white students at the expense of students of color, immigrants, and English language learners. This is especially concerning for critical scholars whose emphasis on liberating marginalized communities may disproportionately reach privileged students. If one of the key tenets of media literacy learning is ‘access’ (Aufderheide, 1993), the reality of access needs to be explored much more closely. This demands a degree of self-reflection among all media literacy

scholars: What work needs to be done in the academy to centralize non-dominant research and scholarship?

We contend the following questions are needed for further research and exploration: What do teachers and media literacy practitioners need to move the study/application forward? What support do K-12 teachers and community workers need to bring media literacy to their learning spaces? How can non-dominant scholarship, by scholars of color and centralizing students of color, be more widely recognized? Putting (critical) media literacy to practice is difficult; how can that difficulty be explored more thoroughly? How can acritical and critical media literacy scholars and practitioners strengthen their common grounds to promote critical thinking about media?

## **Conclusion**

Our goal in this piece was to illuminate the key distinctions and similarities between the top-cited American acritical and critical media literacy scholars in an effort to clarify the positions for scholars and activists interested in adopting media literacy into their research and teaching. In doing so, we also point out the gaps *across* the research and, ideally, have created space for future research, especially on (critical) media literacy assessment. Decades of research on media literacy in the United States has resulted in crucial findings regarding the various curricular approaches offered by educators. However, there is still much more to be studied regarding the effectiveness of these approaches and the audiences they reach.

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