

Monica Bulger

Questions About Digital Literacy

Interview by Gabriela Dumancela, Berkman Center For Internet & Society, Summer Intern 2014

Risks and Harms Online

"Cyber-bullying affects a significant number of young people, indeed it seems to be the most commonly experienced source of Internet-related harm. However, because so many studies assume that cyber-bullying is intrinsically harmful without unpacking the nature of the harm inflicted, there is not enough evidence (and consequent understanding) of longer term mental health effects, educational outcomes, or differing levels of resilience in those affected, etc." (1)

Question 1: What is the difference between the risks and harms that children and youth face online?

Risk is the possibility of something happening and harm is an actual outcome. For example, there are claims that playing video games increases violent behaviors; that is a possible risk. The reality is that the majority of people playing video games are not, to the best of my knowledge, demonstrating increased levels of violence. So, the harm would be if players did become more violent or if they became more desensitized to violence.

Children's Empowerment

"An ideal learning scenario is one in which we empower students to feel responsible for their learning experience and create an environment in which the technologies, no matter how seductively distracting, can be used as part of their learning (3)"

Question 4: What type of intervention can be developed in order to empower children through the use of technology?

I do not think that there is just one intervention, I think that it is quite a few interventions. Returning to Kopplin, he had to have scientific knowledge, the ability to argue, the ability to effectively communicate verbally and in writing. So, all of these are skills that are already being taught in schools. It is just a matter of incorporating how each technology can be used to better communicate a message. I would also say that it takes practice and time to develop, digital literacy, like any other expertise.

"It is not how many web pages they visit that determine students' digital literacy proficiency, it is how they use the information on the pages they visit. Students in the digital age still need classic scholarship skills, particularly how to select and integrate information from multiple sources" (2)

Question 2: What could be a good example of digital media literacy?

Digital Literacy Proficiency

I often use Zack Kopplin's case as an example. He is a student from the US, that was living in a state, where schools were going to be required to teach creationism, in parallel with teaching evolution. This student felt that religious beliefs should not be taught in science courses. So, he organized groups of people to protest through Facebook, Twitter, blogs and the national media. I felt that he demonstrated strong digital media literacy because he knew which groups to address in which media and how to use the different media to get his message across. I think that is the aim of digital media literacy.

Question 5: Why do you think that government bodies from developing countries make poor decisions in their choices to incorporate technologies in learning settings?

Challenges in The Developing World

Unfortunately, there has been a lot of over promising the potential for technology as a fix for education. If those promises were true, it would be very attractive to have something that is inexpensive, that can quickly solve some of the perceived problems in education. Often times, politicians are under pressure to provide quick 'fixes', facing unreasonable expectations in terms of timing and costs. The type of long-term attention necessary to fix the broader social and economic challenges facing education are often beyond the scope of these quick fixes, are expensive, and require the coordination of multiple facets of government. Researchers and educators can improve this process by developing a strong evidence base to inform decision making and make clear recommendations for interventions to promote change.

Indicators for Measuring Media Literacy

Question 3: From your recent study about the development of indicators for measuring digital literacy; how can they continue to be applied in the future? Since technology changes so fast, and also the risk and ways of using technology change so frequently,

If you focus just on the technologies, you are going to be constantly jumping from one to another and be behind. But, what tends to be consistent is people. While we might have more information or might be facing information presented in different formats, there are some fundamentals to how we process information. When we try to figure out how to measure digital or media literacy, we need to look at people's practices. What does not change? So, one thing in people's practices is for example how we bring information together, how we make sense of it and develop our own understanding. So, that is happening whether we are looking at Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. We are still taking information in and then processing it.

Privacy Management

Question 6: Speaking about privacy; since there is not a common understanding of this concept, how do you think that schools should provide advice to their students about this subject, should they regulate certain practices?

I think schools need to guide student's use. When I was in junior high we were learning how to trust or not trust media messages, discerning between advertisement and messages on television shows versus what might be factual, rather than entertainment or with commercial purposes. So those lessons can also be applied to Internet use, being able to distinguish between trustworthy sites and not trustworthy sites; what are the signals and the cues for that? Also, what should students do when they encounter upsetting materials, how to protect themselves, how to protect their information and how to avoid certain sites. Basically, what schools can do is teach kids to be critical users of the internet.

1) Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova, Victoria Jane Nash & Monica Bulger (2014): Evidence on the extent of harms experienced by children as a result of online risks: implications for policy and research, Information, Communication & Society. 2) Bulger, M.E., Mayer, R.E. & Metzger, M. (in press). Knowledge and processes that predict proficiency in digital literacy. Reading and Writing. 3) "Banning laptops doesn't solve the distraction problem." Monica Bulger's thoughts about digital literacy. N.p., n.d. Web. 6 Aug. 2014. <<http://monicabulger.com/2010/04/banning-laptops-doesnt-solve-the-distraction-problem/>>. 3) "Banning laptops doesn't solve the distraction problem." Monica Bulger's thoughts about digital literacy. N.p., n.d. Web. 6 Aug. 2014. <<http://monicabulger.com/2010/04/banning-laptops-doesnt-solve-the-distraction-problem/>>.

From EDUCATION to MEDIA LITERACY

Question 7: Why did you decide to study digital literacy?

I started to study digital literacy because I was teaching undergraduate composition just as students were increasingly using the internet for course-related research. As the Internet became easier to use, assignments were changing too. I was interested in seeing how students were using the information, whether they were overwhelmed, what strategies they were using to understand the information, and how they were bringing that together in writing their academic papers. So, that is what interested me in digital literacy. I looked at it from a college student's perspective. Later, I studied scholars' use of digital resources. I tried to look at their experience and identify best practices. In studying physicists' use of Internet resources, I found information sharing occurring on a much larger scale. Then, questions started coming up about teens sharing private information through Facebook and different means, almost violating their own privacy. So, I started to work with people studying children's use of the Internet and this where I am right now. Once we look at children's use of different technologies, we can see that there are opportunities for empowerment and there are also chances of harm. Neither of those are happening in a vacuum. There is not a single intervention to improve either side. Digital literacy alone is not the sole tool for empowering and it is also not the sole tool for protecting. So, I wanted to look at what aspects of child protection can be enhanced by digital literacy and then, what is left? How we can minimize harms occurring to children online? This is the work that I am developing now.

The Challenge of Multi-disciplinary Studies

"I was motivated to continue attending seminars and lectures outside my field because I had a question I couldn't answer. I wanted a way to measure students' online research practices, to understand why they selected certain sources and how they used them. Despite how initially uncomfortable it was for an Education student with no programming background to attend courses in Computer Science, or with a limited quantitative research background to attend Cognitive Psychology courses, I was motivated to keep trying⁽⁴⁾.

Question 8: In your experience as a scholar, what have been the major challenges you have overcome?

I think that addressing issues that do not easily lend themselves to quantification has been a challenge. If you ask somebody what is digital literacy, if you ask this question to different scholars, there is not going to be a quick agreement on the definition. An example that I give of a student being digitally literate, might not be the same example as somebody else will give. So, figuring out how to quantify those type of things has been challenging. I love trying to quantify difficult topics and I love working in an interdisciplinary environment. But, I do think that both are very challenging. These issues cannot be addressed by only one discipline. Becoming more familiar with policy dimensions, and how policy happens has been a challenge to me as someone with more of a focus on learning and cognition. Also, learning the Computer Science dimensions, and just learning all the time. I love learning all of this, but it is definitely a challenge.

Future Collaboration at The Berkman Center For Internet & Society

Question 9: At the Berkman Center, what is going to be your area of focus?

It is a little bit unusual to have someone with a PhD in Education working at Berkman, since it is based in a Law School. But the thing is that learning, using the Internet, none of these things happen in a vacuum. So, in order to understand the context in which they are happening, the realities, the daily use, you really need to have people who can speak outside of their disciplinary silos. That is one of the major accomplishments of Berkman, to connect people from different disciplines who can speak with each other on these issues. For the upcoming year, I will be looking at children's rights in a digital context. What Sonia Livingstone and I have found is that globally, children's rights are often overlooked. This happened before the Internet and continues. So, there is a lot of space here for improvement. My main work is going to be mapping and better understanding children's rights in a global and digital context. In analyzing the harms that are occurring through digital use, I would like to explore what can be reduced by digital literacy interventions and what type of digital literacy interventions will best work.

4) "Talking to each other: the challenge of interdisciplinary work." Monica Bulger's thoughts about digital literacy. N.p., n.d. Web. 6 Aug. 2014. <<http://monicabulger.com/2012/12/talking-to-each-other-the-challenge-of-interdisciplinary-work/>>.