



CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY AND CULTURAL AUTONOMY IN A MEDIATED WORLD

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Critical Media Literacy and Cultural Autonomy in a Mediated World

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INTRODUCTION

We live in mediated worlds. Every waking hour of our lives finds us close, physically and mentally, to some sort of media content: Television, radio, movies, magazines, billboards, blogs, YouTube videos, websites, and social media like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, TikTok, and Pinterest. Media scholars have been researching the ubiquitous role that media play in our lives for decades, but the current media environment is unlike any seen in history, as developments in digital technologies have produced a veritable onslaught of words, images, and sounds that can be accessed anywhere, at any time; all from a device that most of us carry around in our pockets. While no one would imagine that a flood rushing through one's home would not have any impact on one's life, it is just as misguided to think that this flood of media does not affect us significantly. Cultural theorist Douglas Kellner writes:

Products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities, including our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our conception of class, ethnicity and race, nationality, sexuality; and division of the world into categories of "us" and "them." Media images help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil... Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence and who is not. They dramatize and legitimate the power of the forces that be and show the powerless that they must stay in their places or be oppressed (2018, p. 6).

These images and spectacles begin infiltrating into our conscious and unconscious minds almost from the moment we are born. Children, raised by mediated caretakers, are exposed to media even before they begin to speak and walk. Education about the production processes, economics, content, technologies, and social impact of media is thus an absolute imperative in the 21st century. As Kellner goes on to say:

We are immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society, and thus it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its meanings and messages. The media are a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy: They contribute to educating us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire—and what not to. The media are forms of pedagogy that teach us how to be men and women. They show us how to dress, look, and consume; how to react to members of different social groups; how to be popular and successful and how to avoid failure; and how to conform to the dominant system of norms, values, practices, and institutions. Consequently, the gaining of critical media literacy is an important resource for individuals and citizens in learning how to cope with a seductive cultural environment. Learning how to read, criticize, and resist sociocultural manipulation can help one empower oneself in relation to dominant forms of media and culture. It can enhance individual sovereignty vis-à-vis media culture and give people more power over their cultural environment (2018, p. 6).

Kellner uses the term “pedagogy” in the above passage because popular culture does indeed function as a type of educational system, even though this is not the stated purpose of the media industries. Young people actually spend much more time with media than they do with parental figures, or in formal schooling, and along the way it is impossible for them not to learn from the stories and images they eagerly consume. As Cortés (2005) notes: “The mass media teach whether or not media makers intend to or realize it. And users learn from the media whether or not they try or are even aware of it... media serve as informal yet omnipresent nonschool textbooks” (p. 55).

In this essay, we explain the powerful role of media in the 21st century, we introduce the concept of critical media literacy as a necessary response to media power, and we outline how a critically informed media education can serve as an empowering experience for young people who increasingly feel overwhelmed and confused by media culture.

What is Media Literacy?

The term media literacy harkens back to a notion, first advanced by educators in the 1930s, that a highly mediated society requires citizens who are fluent in the use and production of media. In the ensuing decades there has been a growing interest in media education built around a common definition of media literacy as the essential skills of accessing, analyzing, evaluating, and creating media messages.

Media literacy scholars and educators believe that just as students are instructed on how to understand, evaluate, and create traditional texts like stories, poems, plays, and essays, it is also crucial to learn how to analyze, interpret, and produce electronic, digital, and visual texts. From a media literacy perspective, traditional literacy is still essential in the 21st century, but it needs to be broadened and enhanced by critical thinking about media forms like advertising, films and television, the internet, and social media.

In the 1980s, the Ontario Ministry of Education created a guide to media literacy that included the following key concepts that still hold true (cited in Aufderheide, 2000):

1. All media are constructions. Whether it is a billboard, blockbuster film, or social media post, all media texts are created by human beings in specific historical and social contexts. They are not simply clear glass windows onto the world, but must be understood as stories, sounds, and images that are filtered through the perspectives of individuals, communities, and organizations. Beneath his famous 1929 painting of a tobacco pipe, which he called “The Treachery of Images,” the artist René Magritte included the words: “This is not a pipe.” Media images of human beings could be accompanied by a similar caveat: These are not people.

2. The media construct reality. While media texts are not the world itself, they do play an important role in shaping how we see and understand life beyond our screens. What type of sneakers are the “cool kids” wearing? What are all my friends doing when I am not around? Why does everyone seem happier than me? What does it mean to fall in or out of love? How do people who are different than me live their lives? What happened in Syria yesterday? Our answers to questions like these often come to us primarily from mediated stories and images.

3. Audiences negotiate meaning in media. While media do influence our perceptions of reality, it is important to keep in mind that various individuals, encountering the same mediated story or image, will often not respond to that content, or even make sense of it, in the same way. We filter the media we encounter through our own backgrounds, knowledge, identities, experiences, even moods. For example, consider a typical advertisement for alcohol. Some young people encountering images of attractive, happy friends laughing and toasting while they consume copious amounts of beer, wine, or hard liquor might indeed be seduced into the belief that alcohol is a necessary component of social life, romance, and belonging. Others, however, will be quick to see through the false images and promises of the alcohol industry and will therefore resist the advertiser’s intended meaning. If this principle were not true, media literacy education would be a fruitless task. It is *because* people do have the potential to negotiate meaning in media that providing them with tools for critical thinking about media industries, messages, technologies, and effects can be a useful educational project.

4. Media have commercial implications. Most of the media messages we encounter on a daily basis—films, television shows, websites, popular music, magazines—are created by profit-seeking institutions, usually large multinational corporations like Time Warner, Disney, and Fox. As the then-CEO of Disney, Michael Eisner, wrote in a 1981 letter to his shareholders: “We have no obligation to make art. We have no obligation to make a statement. To make money is our only objective.” Even the social media posts, pictures, memes, and videos that people create themselves are distributed through corporate platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. While these services may appear to be free to access and use, their business models are built on mining the personal information of users and capitalizing on that data through targeted advertising. So, a media-literate person will always “follow the money” when analyzing the stories and images they encounter. This means asking questions like: Who funded this production? Who will benefit financially from my use of this content? Who owns and controls the content? And, how do these financial arrangements constrain and shape what can and can’t be included in a given media production?

5. Media contain ideological and value messages. The cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (2018) defined ideology in a media context as “images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (p. 90). We are all invested in ideological ways of seeing the world whether we are consciously

aware of those values or not. Because media is created by humans it is impossible for there to be any sort of value-free media content. Media portrayals of gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, class, ability, religion, nationality, politics, war, the environment, and more, inevitably favor certain ideological stances on power and human relationships. This should not be thought of as a conspiracy. As noted above, the only real “conspiracy” for profit-seeking media institutions is the conspiracy to make as much money as possible. While profit might be the primary value of media corporations, other values and ideologies can be identified in the stories and images that are created and distributed in order to generate revenue.

6. Media have social and political implications. The reason media content and technologies are important (even seemingly trivial advertisements, cartoons, superhero movies, social media posts, and the like) is, despite what media industry spokespeople often claim, media offer much more than “just entertainment” and they do much more than just “give people what they want.” The highly constructed, well-funded, value-laden images and stories of the media industries have a real impact on the social worlds we inhabit. Media influence both individuals and, on a macro-level, the societies those individuals live in. Media research has demonstrated the very real impact of media content on a range of social issues, including violence, sexuality, politics, consumerism, race and gender, religious beliefs, family dynamics, education, our relationship to the environment, and much more.

7. Form and content are closely related in media. The media scholar Marshall McLuhan was perhaps best known for his famous phrase, “The medium is the message” or sometimes “The medium is the massage” (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). What he meant is that the specific technologies that bring us media play a crucial role in shaping the content and social impact of that media. Television and the internet, for example, are forms of media that are biased toward the visual. Having good visuals to accompany an event can be an overriding factor in whether a story gets covered in the news or not. If a helicopter crashes in a suburban neighborhood, and the resulting explosion is captured on video, you can be sure it will be spread all across the nation even if no one is seriously hurt. But another item, perhaps one that ultimately has more relevance to more people, like a reduction in funding for afterschool programs for example, but lacking a compelling visual hook, might never get our attention. If we stop to reflect for just a minute, we know that reading about something in a newspaper is different than hearing a radio broadcast, which is different than watching the same story on television, which is different than seeing a Facebook post about it. The same holds true for watching a movie on your phone, or on the television in your living room, or in a darkened theater on a huge screen with giant speakers shaking your body as the sound pours out of them.

8. Each medium has a unique aesthetic form. This last principle calls our attention to the fact that all media are art forms in their own right. Media aesthetics is its own field of study, focusing on issues such as lighting, color, camera angle, motion, editing, sound, typography, scripting, and much more. Have you ever felt yourself tearing up when a particular song is used in a television show? When watching a horror film

have you noticed how both the sound and lighting changes just before something terrifying happens? Effective use of aesthetic principles in media production can be the difference between media content that affects us deeply and content that we dismiss as “amateurish” or uninteresting. A media-literate person understands how media aesthetics play an important role in the overall meaning and social impact of mediated stories and images.

Starting with these basic principles, media literacy education is a project that is meant to empower media audiences to engage in critical thinking about the powerful role that media play in our lives. That sort of critical reflection is the first step in taking control of our media use rather than letting the media industries control how we think and use our time. Ultimately this is a question of power. Making power differentials explicit is the difference between a limited sort of media education, where students might learn certain analytical and production skills, and a more challenging approach known as critical media literacy.

CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY: CHALLENGING MEDIA POWER

In the United States, media education has not been as widely adopted as in several other nations around the world. Where media education does take place in the US it tends to be focused on skills: the analysis and production of media content. In other words, it attends to the messages and texts of media rather than the institutions that create media and their impact on individuals and societies. Critical media scholars, however, have argued that while media messages are important, they are not the only issue at stake. Jhally and Lewis (2006) call for a *contextual* rather than just *textual* approach to media education, stating:

A textual analysis that takes place without an examination of the institutional, cultural, and economic conditions in which texts are produced and understood is necessarily limited. Media literacy, in short, is about more than the analysis of messages; it is about an awareness of why those messages are there. It is not enough to know that they are produced—or even how, in a technical sense, they are produced. To appreciate the significance of contemporary media, we need to know why they are produced, under what constraints and conditions they are produced, and by whom they are produced (pp. 227-228).

Similarly, Duran, Yousman, Walsh, and Longshore (2008) call for holistic media literacy as an approach that “encompasses both textual and contextual concerns within a critical framework, [and] argues that to be a citizen, rather than a passive consumer in media-saturated societies, one must develop an understanding of the commercial structure of the media industries and the political and ideological implications of this structure. From this perspective, in addition to being able to skillfully deconstruct media texts, the person who is truly media literate is also knowledgeable of the political economy of the media, the consequences of media consumption, and the activist and alternative media movements that seek to challenge mainstream media norms and create a more democratic system” (p. 51).

Going beyond media messages allows critical scholars, educators, activists, and artists to attend to issues of power, domination, and control that might be overlooked by more limited approaches to media education. Funk, Kellner, and Share (2016) put it this way: “[Critical media literacy] calls for examining the hierarchical power relations that are embedded in all communication and that ultimately benefit dominant social groups at the expense of subordinate ones” (p. 23). Specifically, critical media literacy “involves identifying, analyzing, and challenging media that promotes representations or narratives involving racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and other forms of discrimination that further marginalize targeted social groups” (Kellner and Share, 2019, p. xiii).

The use of the word “challenging” in Kellner and Share’s definition is key. Unlike more mainstream models of media education, critical media literacy does not stop at the level of analysis. Critical media literacy encourages media audiences to break away from a passive stance of conditioned receptivity and to embrace a more resistant perspective that does not automatically purchase and consume the products of the media industries. The public now possess more communication tools than ever before and those tools can be used to challenge the images and stories of media corporations, to mobilize media activism, and to create alternative forms of media that are more inclusive, democratic, and equitable.

It’s also important to note that the word “critical” should not be dismissed as simply meaning cynical, negative, or judgmental. The cultural scholar bell hooks (2010) points out that “there is a useful distinction to be made between critique that seeks to expand consciousness and harsh criticism that attacks or trashes” (p. 137). Critical media literacy is not about “bashing” all media. Rather, it is an approach that advocates for thorough analysis and strong responses to a corporate media system that would prefer not to be challenged at all.

Critical media literacy, therefore, differs from other approaches to media education, in four distinct ways. First, by attending to the institutions that create media messages and analyzing them from a political economic perspective. Second, by critiquing the ideologies inherent in media content. Third, by examining the power of media to influence the perceptions and behaviors of individuals and the power arrangements of the social structures they inhabit. And finally, this critical analytical focus should be capped off by practical education on how media power can be challenged and disrupted by media activists, artists, scholars, students, and educators. We shall consider each of these elements briefly before turning our attention to a specific focus on the ways in which media and popular culture influence young people’s attitudes and behaviors related to gender and sexuality.

The Political Economic Perspective

One significant difference between critical media literacy and more traditional forms of media education lies in the willingness to examine and critique the structures, motivations, and imperatives of the for-profit institutions that produce, distribute, or otherwise monetize most of the media that members of the public create and consume. This means attending to the political economy of the media. While the social science of economics obviously calls our attention to issues of material relations and the distribution of resources, Drazen (2018) explains how political economy goes further: “If economics is the study of the optimal use of scarce resources, political economy begins with the political nature of decision making and is concerned with how politics will affect economic choices in a society” (p. 5). Drazen argues that adding political concerns to economic analysis means emphasizing that issues of power cannot be separated from issues of resource distribution: “In the political science literature politics is defined as... the exercise of power and authority. Power, in turn, means the ability of an individual or group to achieve outcomes which reflect his [sic]

objectives" (p. 6). In the case of media, the outcomes and objectives media industries are most concerned with is the maximization of profit... by any means necessary.

More specifically, McChesney (2008) explains that when applied to media, a political economic approach:

endeavors to connect how media and communication systems are shaped by ownership, market structures, commercial support, technologies, labor practices, and government policies. The political economy of media then links the media and communication systems to how both economic and political systems work, and social power is exercised, in society. ... The central question for media political economists is whether, on balance, the media system serves to promote or undermine democratic institutions and practices. Are media a force for social justice or for oligarchy? And equipped with that knowledge, what are the options for citizens to address the situation? Ultimately, the political economy of media is a critical exercise, committed to enhancing democracy (pp. 12-13).

Critical media literacy therefore goes beyond analysis of media content to examine the powerful corporations and organizations that create media primarily to generate capital but along the way come to dominate the cultural sphere. Frechette, Higdon, and Williams (2016) thus argue that critical media literacy "analyze[s] how media industries reproduce sociocultural structures of power by determining who gets to tell the stories of a society, what points of view and organizational interests will shape the constructions of these stories, and who the desired target audience is" (p. 205).

A political economic lens allows us to understand that the commercial media industries are dominated by a small number of multinational corporations who see their audiences not as citizens wanting and needing entertainment and information but purely as sources of profit (Jhally & Livant, 1986). Michael Eisner's message to shareholders noted above serves as evidence of this, as do many other statements by media owners and executives. For example, the founder of the US's largest radio chain, Clear Channel Communications, told *Fortune Magazine*: "We're not in the business of providing news and information. We're not in the business of providing well-researched music. We're simply in the business of selling our customers' products." After acquiring YouTube in 2008, Google chief executive Eric Schmidt said: "I don't think we've quite figured out the perfect solution of how to make money, and we're working on that. That's our highest priority this year." And, during the 2016 Presidential campaign, the head of CBS, referring to then-candidate Trump's divisive but audience-generating rhetoric, said: "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS."

Ideological Critique

While these quotes from media owners and executives show that the primary objective of most media organizations is to generate as much profit as possible, this does not mean that media representations are ideologically neutral. As noted above,

ideology is about the ideas, beliefs, and feelings by which people make sense of their environments and interactions (O'Shaughnessy, Stadler, & Casey, 2019). Traditional approaches to media literacy often avoid discussions of ideology because of a concern with "taking sides." However, critical scholars have long understood that neutrality is a myth that serves to protect the status-quo from criticism. In an interview for a documentary film about his life, the historian Howard Zinn addressed the myth of neutral education and scholarship:

I don't believe it's possible to be neutral. The world is already moving in certain directions. And to be neutral, to be passive in a situation like that is to collaborate with whatever is going on. And I, as a teacher, do not want to be a collaborator with whatever is happening in the world. I want myself, as a teacher, and I want you as students, to intercede with whatever is happening in the world (interviewed in Ellis & Mueller, 2004).

Rather than neutral objectivity, media scholars have identified recurring ideological patterns in media representations of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, nationality, religion, and more. Media offer us stories about war and peace, consumerism, immigration, politics, the environment, and many other issues, all of which inevitably favor certain stances over others. While media are not monolithic, and it is possible to identify varying perspectives across a range of media texts, it is also common for media representations to reinforce the dominant ideologies of a given culture. O'Shaughnessy, Stadler, and Casey (2019) note:

The dominant ideology—comprising a set of shared feelings, values, beliefs, and so on—is shared by the majority of people in a society, thus making it dominant in two senses. First, it is dominant in numerical terms. Second, it is dominant in the sense that it tends to support the interests of the dominant ruling groups. We are interested in the way dominant ideas, beliefs, and values, which support particular groups in society (whites, the middle class, men), come to be accepted and believed by many people in society. We are also interested in the way the media contribute to this acceptance (pp. 176-177).

When it comes to our everyday interactions and how race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and more shape our daily experiences, popular culture tends to reinforce stereotypical, and often demeaning, images. For example, while it is possible to find alternative representations of gender in popular culture, more often in Hollywood films, music videos, advertising, magazines, video games, and television we encounter images of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity, where men are narrowly defined by violent, dominating behaviors and women by their physical appearance and sexuality. And people who do not subscribe to binary gender identities are often either invisible, ridiculed, or framed as a threat.

Media ideologies work by making core notions of politics and culture seem natural or just "commonsense" rather than particular, historical, and socially constructed. Thus, capitalism is the only possible way to organize the economic practices of a society.

Or, the US military is a benevolent force spreading democracy throughout the world. Or, men are the natural born leaders and women are best suited for the kitchen or bedroom. Or being young is better than being old, and thinness (for women) or large muscles (for men) is something we should all aspire to. Or young black men are all potential criminals. Or Asian people are nerdy and good at math. Perhaps the most common dominant ideology, found in a range of media texts, is the idealization of consumerism as the path to fulfillment and happiness. We see this message over and over, not just in advertising, but also in media stories and images that subtly suggest that big beautiful homes, expensive automobiles, lots of high-tech gadgets, and designer clothes are all necessary to the good life.

A note of caution is in order, however. To suggest that an ideology is dominant does not mean that all members of a given society willingly accept it. Likewise, to state that commercial media tend to support dominant ideologies does not mean that this is a secret conspiracy or that it is true for all media at all times. The media environment is increasingly complex with many different perspectives and ideologies vying for space and attention. O'Shaughnessy, Stadler, and Casey (2019) put it this way:

People are not sheep helplessly herded about by ideological forces. Just as media audiences do not passively accept and absorb the intended meaning of media texts, individuals and groups do not always accept or conform to the dominant ideology... It is important to remember that the media, and their producers and consumers, are capable of representing and engaging with alternative ideas: ideological assumptions and norms can be challenged and changed (pp. 184-185).

Audiences can indeed resist the pull of corporate media messages, and, increasingly every day, create their own media, which has at least the potential to counter media stereotypes and misrepresentations. In fact, this is the reason why critical media literacy as an educational and activist project has any hope at all of succeeding. However, this possibility of resistance should not be taken to mean that media have no power at all to shape our perceptions and imaginations. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Thus, it is imperative that critical media literacy also extends beyond the analysis of media institutions and texts to consider the power of media to make a real impact on individuals and societies.

The Social Impact of Media

From advertising messages that encourage us to achieve the "American Dream" by accumulating mountains of consumer goods, to violent hypermasculine role models in some of the world's most popular movies and video games, to online pornography that teaches that the debasement and abuse of women is sexy and exciting, to the addictive nature of social media and smartphones, there is little question that media industries, stories, images, and technologies play a powerful role in influencing how we spend our time, what we think about and value, and how we view other people... in short, how we live our lives.

Decades of research have confirmed that it is not just a hunch that media of all kinds function as much more than mere sources of entertainment or information. In the first decades of the 20th century research on questions such as the impact of movies on children, and the influence of propaganda in manipulating public opinion, found that our knowledge, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors are shaped by the information and ideas we are exposed to and the role models we encounter, not just in our interpersonal interactions but in the pages that we turn, the audio we listen to, and the screens that we watch (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Sparks, 2016; Stokes, 2013).

During the second half of the 20th century two ongoing media research programs amassed substantial evidence that how we think about and see the world is very much influenced by the media we are exposed to. Agenda-setting research found that mediated messages help to determine not only what issues we think *about*, but also what we actually think, due to the way they are framed by media storytellers (Lang & Lang, 1981; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

According to the agenda-setting model, seeing many television news stories about drug abuse, for example, would be correlated with believing that drug addiction is an important social issue. Furthermore, whether viewers believed drug addiction should be treated as a crime or an illness would be influenced by the tone and approach of the stories they were exposed to. During this same period, cultivation research established that the more television one is exposed to, the more likely they are to believe the highly distorted television version of reality... even over their own experience (Gerbner & Gross, 1972). Thus, even those individuals who live in relatively safe neighborhoods may be prone to overestimating the prevalence of crime and violence, and their own chances of being victimized, if they are heavy viewers of television. As it grew and developed, cultivation research encompassed a range of topics beyond fear of violence, including media influence on beliefs and attitudes about race, gender, sexuality, politics, science, and more (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2012).

In addition to these social scientific research projects, at about the same time an enormously influential humanistic approach to understanding the social impact of media arose in Great Britain and spread throughout the world. Kellner (2018) explains that critical cultural studies:

[W]as inaugurated by the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which developed a variety of critical methods for the analysis, interpretation, and criticism of cultural artifacts. Through a set of internal debates, and responding to social struggles and movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, the Birmingham group came to focus on the interplay of representations and ideologies of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality in cultural texts, including media culture. They were among the first to study the effects on audiences of newspapers, radio, television, film, advertising, and other popular cultural forms. They also focused on how various audiences interpreted and used media culture differently, analyzing the factors that made different

audiences respond in contrasting ways to various media texts, and how they made use of media in their personal and social lives in a multiplicity of ways... Cultural studies insists that culture must be studied within the social relations and system through which culture is produced and consumed, and that this study of culture is intimately bound up with the study of society, politics, and economics (pp. 6-7).

Continuing on into the 21st century, both social scientific and humanistic research has shown that viewers, readers, and listeners bring their own interpretations to the content they attend to, but there are also a wide range of media effects on our knowledge, beliefs, values, and behaviors (Ruddock, 2012). For example, there is a relationship between exposure to distorted media representations and the holding of stereotypical notions of race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion, ability, age and much more (Sparks, 2016). Advertisements and product placements in films and television have been shown to influence adolescents' consumption of junk food, tobacco, alcohol, and other harmful products (Kelso, 2019). Similarly, research has demonstrated a relationship between exposure to the "thin ideal" in media images of women and girls and both body dissatisfaction and unhealthy eating habits (Derenne & Beresin, 2006; Harrison, 2000). Media of all kinds have a significant impact on the public's understanding of, and participation in, politics (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018; Cushion, 2019). And recent research has shown a correlation between high levels of social media use and low self-esteem, sleep deprivation, depression, and anxiety (Woods & Scott, 2016). These are just a few examples of the powerful social impact of media. Some scholars now use the term "mediatization" to discuss the large-scale ways that media is now omnipresent and interwoven into most aspects of daily life, influencing our interactions, relationships, institutions, social structures, and cultural processes in multiple ways. Many crucial aspects of societies, politics for example, are now unimaginable without media (Croteau & Hoynes, 2019).

Considering the accumulated evidence of the central role that media play in our lives, the question that critical media literacy attempts to answer is what individuals, communities, and societies can do to retain their critical autonomy. A true critical response involves the sort of critical education about media institutions, content, and audiences that we have been discussing, along with the overlapping projects of alternative media production and media activism.

Alternative Media Production and Media Activism

The last defining characteristic of critical media literacy we note, before moving to a specific focus on media and gender, is the imperative of moving from analysis to action. From this point of view, just understanding media is not enough. We have to employ our understanding of the problems of the media environment to counter and transform that environment.

As discussed above, the critical lens allows us to see that media industries offer much more than just information and entertainment. They also operate as the voice of the powerful in society. Critical media literacy emphasizes the many ways that voice can be challenged by alternative voices. As Funk, Kellner, and Share (2016) put it: “CML provides a framework that encourages people to read information critically in multiple formats, to create alternative representations that question hierarchies of power, social norms and injustices, and to become agents of change” (p. 2). These agents of change utilize multiple strategies when seeking to transform the media environment, ranging from social media campaigns against harmful media distortions and stereotypes, to protests against discrimination in media industries, to culture jamming and the creation of alternative media. O’Shaughnessy, Stadler, and Casey (2019) offer this example:

Culture jamming emerges out of a tradition of media activism, dating back to the 1970s, that addresses images in billboards and outdoor advertisements. In the 1970s, feminists unhappy about the sexual objectification of women started to paint slogans and captions on images of women used in outdoor advertisements. Such political graffiti drew attention to the sexism in these images and in doing so challenged patriarchy (p. 194).

Today, media activists have many more tools at their disposal, as the proliferation of social media and digital technologies has made it easier than ever before for the public to become creators of their own media stories and images. Lievrouw (2011) notes: “This changing landscape has created unprecedented opportunities for expression and interaction, especially among activists, artists, and other political and cultural groups around the world who have found new media to be inexpensive, powerful tools for challenging the givens of mainstream or popular culture” (pp. 1-2). The challenge still lies in finding a wide audience for independent media, but the possibilities of creating blogs, memes, wikis, remixes, websites, podcasts, and videos that offer counter-narratives to those of the corporate media are almost endless.

Looking at the media environment in the first decades of the 21st century, Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) see “a movement toward a more participatory model of culture, one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined” (p. 2). By way of example, they offer the case of a media activist group called Racebending who were fans of an animated television series, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. The show featured a multicultural cast of characters, albeit from mythical ethnic groups. Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) explain the controversy and response to a film based on the television program:

When fans heard that a proposed live-action feature film version would cast all white actors in the core roles... they rallied against what they saw as a betrayal of the values associated with the original property. They drew on a variety of approaches fan communities have taken to put pressure on the film’s writer, director, and producer... Fans joined forces with other activist groups dedicated

to tackling Hollywood's discrimination and challenging screen representations of people of color, such as the theater group East West Players and the media advocacy group Media Action Network for Asian Americans (p. 171).

Through a hybrid strategy of creating their own videos and calling for a boycott, Racebending forced the producers to respond to their activism and they brought wide attention to what has been called whitewashing: when media adaptations replace characters of color with white characters.

However, while it is true that technological developments have been effectively utilized by media activist groups, as well as movements for social justice like Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and #MeToo, caution is necessary before adopting a position of unbridled techno-optimism. As Taylor (2014) notes, "We should be skeptical of the narrative of democratization by technology alone" (p. 64). Social structures cannot be transformed solely through our laptops and smartphones. Real social change must be advanced on multiple fronts, certainly involving the use of technology, but also through grassroots organizing, and taking to the streets when necessary, as the activists in Ferguson, Missouri, recognized after the police slaying of yet another unarmed young black man, Michael Brown. Taylor (2014) highlights the need for expansive strategizing even by tech-savvy activists:

Those who applaud social production and networked amateurism, the colorful cacophony that is the Internet, and the creative capacities of everyday people to produce entertaining and enlightening things online, are right to marvel. There is amazing inventiveness, boundless talent and ability, and overwhelming generosity on display. Where they go wrong is in thinking that the Internet is an egalitarian, let alone revolutionary, platform for our self-expression and development, that being able to shout into the digital torrent is adequate for democracy (p. 66).

Media activism thus must be harnessed to other concerns and approaches in order to effectively challenge and transform oppressive social structures and cultural processes such as the focus of our next section: the damaging gender stereotypes and misogynistic pornographic imagery created and disseminated by profit-seeking media organizations.

UNDERSTANDING GENDER IN A PORNIIFIED MEDIA CULTURE

As feminist scholar Shira Tarrant (2009) notes, “Every time we log on to the Internet, surf TV channels, watch YouTube clips, go to the movies or pass a billboard on the side of the road, we are getting messages about masculinity and femininity, how to do it correctly, and what happens if we don’t” (p. 7). Critical media literacy is essential to navigating these messages because it provides ways to examine, question, and challenge how gender and sexuality are represented in the media environments we inhabit. In this section, we address issues of gender and media by utilizing the framework presented above: political economy, ideological critique, social impact, and alternative media and media activism. Through this overview we demonstrate how media shape young people’s attitudes and behaviors about gender and sexuality and how we can foster cultural autonomy through critical media literacy.

What is Gender?

Before we can employ critical media literacy, it is necessary to fully understand what is meant by the term gender. Gender does not simply mean male and female— it goes far beyond that. Unlike assigned sex, which is ascribed at birth and is based on biological traits, gender is socially and culturally constructed. This means that masculinity and femininity are not natural, predetermined, or inherent but are learned behaviors and performances that are constantly being reinforced or challenged in our larger cultural contexts. In sum, gender is something we learn, feel, and do. The term gender identity is thus used to describe a person’s internal sense of gender— identification as a man, woman, or someone who rejects binary gender norms, embraces gender fluidity, and might identify as transgender or genderqueer (GLAAD, 2019; Ryle, 2018). Gender should also not be confused with sexual orientation, which “describes a person’s enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to another person” (GLAAD, 2019, p. 28). Because our experience of gender is impacted by other facets of our identity, we cannot attempt to understand gender in isolation. For example, while they might both identify as male, the experiences of a straight black man are clearly not the same as those of a gay white man. Therefore, scholars use the metaphor of intersectionality when considering how gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, dis/ability, religion, and more are all intertwined in shaping significant variations in our lived experiences (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989). Taken together, all of these concepts provide a foundation for a more nuanced understanding of gender.

While gender is actually complex, media messages often rely on simplistic gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes “are rigid, oversimplified, exaggerated beliefs about femininity and masculinity that misrepresent most women and men” (Valentine et al., 2020, p. xvi). These stereotypical media messages include depictions of men as strong, independent, powerful, intelligent, resourceful, and courageous while women are portrayed as emotional, passive, frivolous, and preoccupied with their

appearance and romance (Gauntlett, 2002). Historically, media representations of individuals that complicated or challenged gender stereotypes were either entirely absent or marginalized, vilified, or ridiculed. Moreover, media often represent the most extreme versions of binary gender: hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity. Lull (2018) defines hegemony as “the power or dominance that one social group holds over others” (p. 34). Cultural institutions like media are central sites for the construction and dissemination of hegemonic ideas that become so normalized that they are mistaken for simply commonsense notions of how the world works. When it comes to gender, hegemonic masculinity is associated with power, violence, aggression, and self-centeredness while hegemonic femininity reduces women to passive, one-dimensional sex objects that must please men by conforming to impossible standards of beauty, nurturance, or both. For examples, just think about wildly popular media forms like the typical Hollywood action film or so-called reality TV shows like *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*.

Perhaps not surprisingly, media representations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity have been greatly influenced by pornography. As pornography has become more widely accessible, the mainstream media have become increasingly hypersexualized (Caputi, 2018; Dines, 2018; Paul, 2006). Now more than ever, media depict extreme or sensationalized sexual imagery even on public displays like billboards, or media aimed at young people, such as comic books. For the most part, hypersexual media messages assume compulsory heterosexuality, which frames men as sexual aggressors and women as provocative and available (Caputi, 2018; Kimmel, 2008). Thus, mediated hypersexuality is not about organic and freely chosen sexual expressions or identities. Instead it should be recognized as a “generic, formulaic, and plasticized” version of sexuality that has been commodified, packaged, and sold to young people through the media (Dines, 2018, p. 391). In order to challenge the power of hypersexualized hegemonic gender messages we must consider the political economy of media, the underlying ideologies behind these images, and the social impact of media representations, as well as routes for media activism and alternative media that challenge narrow and damaging cultural constructions of gender and sexuality.

Media, Gender, and The Political Economic Perspective

In order to fully understand media constructions of gender we have to take in to account the overall structures and profit motives of most media organizations. If we look at who owns and operates the world’s most powerful media corporations, the answer is almost always white men. Within those organizations, industry statistics reveal that the primary storytellers are also men, with women playing a severely reduced role. For instance, only 7% of directors, 13% of writers, and 20% of producers

in Hollywood are female (Smith, 2019). Similarly, only 28% of all creators, directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and directors of photography working on broadcast network, cable, and streaming television programs are women (Lauzen, 2017). Likewise, only 22% of video game developers are women and only 2% are transgender (Welch, 2018). Given these behind-the-camera statistics, is it any wonder that despite making up more than half the population, during the 2016-2017 season, females only comprised 42% of all speaking characters on television (Lauzen, 2017)? Or that of the top 100 films in 2016, only 8 depicted a young female as the lead or co-lead (Smith et al., 2017)? Or that for the last four years less than 10% of all the games featured at the Electronic Entertainment Expo, the video game industry's leading event, featured female protagonists (Sarkeesian & Petit, 2019)? And, as abysmal as these figures are, equitable representation behind the scenes and on screen is actually worse when race and/or sexuality are taken into account (GLAAD, 2018; GLAAD, 2019; Hunt et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019).

Importantly, research shows that when women are involved in storytelling it makes a big difference. For instance, Smith (2019) found that the presence of even one woman writer on a film increases screen time for female characters by 10% and Lauzen (2017) discovered that on television programs with at least one woman creator, females accounted for 51% of major characters. In contrast, in programs exclusively created by men, women only accounted for 38% of major characters (Lauzen, 2017). Including more women behind the scenes has also been linked to increased racial diversity, as well as broader and more nuanced representations of all people.

In addition to understanding who is responsible for the media messages we consume and how those individuals and organizations influence what we see, it is important to understand why media content is being created in the first place. The profit motive underlying commercial media messages is directly connected to gender stereotypes and hypersexual content. While the old adage "sex sells" has long been familiar, within our pornified media culture it has been taken to a new extreme. In advertising, for example, images of incredibly thin, scantily dressed women in provocative situations are used to make messages about products stand out in an oversaturated media environment. Moreover, movies, television shows, and now video games featuring sex and violence are consumed worldwide, not because they are what audiences demand, but because they require little translation, are easily understandable across cultures, and are therefore easier to export than more nuanced or complicated stories (Gerbner, 1995).

These pornified images link happiness, attractiveness, and the promise of relationships with hypersexualized bodies (Jhally, 2018), telling young women in particular that in order to be "sexy" they need to spend a great deal of money on products that transform their bodies into the porn ideal (Dines, 2018). Likewise, similar messages lure young men into unnecessary spending with the promise of sex—if a young man buys the right beer, or car, or body spray, he will be surrounded by a bevy of beautiful young women clamoring for his attention. It is not coincidence that these images promote an unattainable "ideal" masculinity and femininity that

young people's actual bodies and relationships can never measure up to. By making young people feel inadequate, corporations are literally able to cash in on their insecurities.

To develop our critical understanding of how media shape gender norms, from a political economic perspective we should ask the following questions: Where did these stories and images come from? Who created them? Who owns them? How were they created? Why were they created? Who benefits from them and in what ways?

Ideological Critique of Media Constructions of Gender

As previously mentioned, while alternative and counter-hegemonic gender representations can be found even in commercial media, the most common and dominant media representations reinforce hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity. At the core of hegemonic masculinity and femininity are issues of power—these gender stereotypes reinforce the subordination of women and continuation of male dominance. Objectification and violence are two ways media perpetuate sexist, racist, and homophobic ideologies that contribute to the oppression of marginalized groups and help maintain the status quo.

Objectification occurs when an individual's subjectivity is taken away—in other words, when someone is dehumanized, devalued, and, as the term suggests, treated like an object. The “male gaze” (Mulvey, 1975) in movies, for example, plays a key role in objectification of women through camera work that takes on the perspective of a heterosexual male as it focuses in on sexualized female body parts—full lips, large breasts, narrow waist, toned midriff, shapely behind, and long legs—or slowly pans up the length of a woman's body. In both cases, women are no longer seen as human beings but as a collection of fragmented parts being presented primarily for heterosexual men's pleasure. In addition to the male gaze, media objectify women by depicting them as child-like, silenced, and incapacitated. For women of color, media objectification also includes being represented as wild, uncontrollable, and animalistic—again portraying them as though they are not fully human (Caputi, 2018). It is no coincidence that these examples of commercial media objectification are similar to common tropes in pornography, where the gendered imbalance of power becomes the source of sexual pleasure and excitement. One of the many consequences of objectification, which dehumanizes women and denies their agency, is that it becomes easier to inflict violence against them. Undoubtedly, these underlying media ideologies contribute to a toxic culture where sexual harassment and assault are both endemic and an epidemic.

More recently we have been witnessing a new version of objectification in the media aimed at women: self-objectification. Self-objectification occurs when women willingly and actively conform to hegemonic hypersexual ideals and present themselves as sex objects for heterosexual men. In other words, inviting the male gaze is depicted as a “choice” that women are freely making, and relying on their sexuality should therefore be considered “empowering.” Instead of being scrutinized by men, self-

objectification is an advanced form of sexualization and exploitation because it calls for women to police their own bodies. Self-objectification furthers gender inequity because when women are preoccupied with their physical appearance above all else they do not have the time and energy to devote to cultivating other aspects of their identity or working for political progress (Dines, 2018). Thus, self-objectification reflects a post-feminist ideology where it is assumed that equality has been achieved and the feminist movement is no longer necessary. Regardless of how it is framed, self-objectification is not true empowerment because it ultimately reduces women to an attractive body whose sole purpose is to provide pleasure for heterosexual men.

Confining media ideologies, however, are not exclusive to women. Men are constantly bombarded with messages that tell them that the only way to achieve and assert manhood is through intimidation, aggression, and violence. As Katz (2011) notes, only by using their body “as an instrument of power, dominance, and control” are men validated (p. 262). Thus, media images in action movies, sports, and video games depict “real men” as “tough,” “hard,” and “strong”—men who will let nothing and no one stand in their way. Not only do these types of messages normalize violence and aggression, but they actually celebrate it. As a result, other qualities that men can and should display—kindness, compassion, nurturance—are rejected and dismissed as “unmanly.” Perhaps even more concerning is that violent hegemonic masculinity is conflated with sexual prowess and appeal, and this validates the dogged pursuit of sex by any means necessary. As a result, women are not considered consenting partners or equals but simply conquests that are nothing more than a measure of manhood and virility (Kimmel, 2008). Porn culture has increasingly taken violent masculinity to the extreme by depicting the domination, coercion, and humiliation of women as a source of pleasure for both men and women. In pornography, men are entitled to behave this way and women are depicted as enjoying body-punishing violation and degradation. For the male viewer, pleasure comes from “the woman’s powerlessness and the man’s (or men’s) unrestricted prerogative to do whatever he wants to her” (Taylor, 2018, p. 12). Here the underlying ideological message is clear—men are in control and should be able to do whatever they want, while women will “take it” and like it.

For young men of color, images of violent masculinity are particularly fraught. While violent white masculinity has been celebrated in popular culture, throughout history men of color have been falsely portrayed as oversexed and uncontrollable, violent super-predators that victimize young white women. Pornified media (and pornography more specifically) promotes and capitalizes on these historical tropes of sexually debased black men. Partially because these racist stereotypes continue to be perpetuated throughout media and pornography, young men of color have been unfairly demonized. Unfounded and irrational fear of black and brown bodies has resulted in the policing, criminalization, and death of young men of color. Ava DuVernay’s 2019 Netflix series about the so-called Central Park Five, *When They See Us*, offers a case study for how ideologies of gender, race, violence, and sexuality can have a profound impact on the lived experiences of young men of color in the United States. When it is assumed that men of color are prone to sexual violence it becomes

easy to convict the innocent—just as it happened with the five young men whose true experiences are depicted in this powerful television series.

Overall, images of objectification and violence in media can be understood as a form of backlash against the progress made by feminist and civil rights movements by showing men (particularly white heterosexual men) as powerful and in control while reinforcing the hegemonic notion that women are powerless and weak. Going beneath surface appearances to explore the underlying ideologies of media stories and images is essential to understanding issues of gender and power. While the ideological exercise we have presented focuses on objectification and violence, there are a range of portrayals to consider. Young people can begin questioning the ideological implications of hegemonic masculinity and femininity by asking questions like: Who is at the center of this story? Whose perspective is the story told from? Who is absent or peripheral? Who has power and control in this story? Who doesn't? Is what we are seeing presented as typical or normal? Why or why not? Does the story depict any consequences for what takes place? Are we invited to question what we are seeing? How might this story shape how people think and act in their daily lives?

The Social Impact of Media Representations of Gender

Although media representations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity are caricatures of how most people actually think and behave, they still provide us with salient comparisons, which we can measure ourselves against. Aware of growing concerns, in 2007, the American Psychological Association published a report on the impact of media and popular culture on the sexualization of young women. According to the APA (2007), sexualization occurs when:

A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified—that is made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person (p.1).

The APA report found that media messages influence young women's decision to adopt a "sexy" appearance and sexual behavior. Furthermore, "sexual stereotypes of girls and women can result in a narrowing of social and economic ambitions and of associated rights and opportunities. Standards of beauty and attractiveness pinned to youthfulness can impact upon lasting anxieties of older women who continually seek to conform to social ideals, often with unrealistic expectations and unsatisfactory outcomes" (Gunter, 2014, p. 29). Sexualized media messages also negatively impact young men by contributing to the development of sexist attitudes and narrow beauty ideals, as well as hindering their ability to establish healthy relationships with young women (Gunter, 2014). Beyond the APA report, research has also established a connection between consumption of sexualized media and viewers' acceptance of objectification and violence toward women (Rodgers & Hust, 2018). In 2019,

researchers found that media sexualization has been linked to increased feelings of shame, anxiety, body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression (Lamb et al., 2019).

Social media offers a prime example of how young people have internalized sexualized media messages about gender. Rather than using social media as a new pathway for self-expression, from Facebook to Snapchat to Instagram, young women are recreating sexist media tropes by posting self-objectifying pictures. Young women post these pictures in an attempt to show that they are desirable—proof of their self-worth is tallied in the number of “likes” and comments. When sexualized posts become the norm, it places an added pressure on all young women to conform to hegemonic femininity’s narrow constraints. As a result, rather than fostering connection, self-expression, and exploration, social media pushes young women to focus on only one dimension of themselves—their appearance—with the promise of validation through others. That validation is easily lost. If (and when) young women aren’t able to negotiate the impossibly thin line between “sexy” and “slutty”, they risk becoming demonized and shamed by their peers. Not surprisingly, participating in self-objectification has been shown to have serious consequences for young women such as “depression, reduced cognitive function, lower GPA, distorted body image, body monitoring, eating disorders, risky sexual behavior, and reduced sexual pleasure” along with lower political efficacy (Orenstein, 2016, pp. 12-13).

For young men, we see the influence of pornified media culture through sexting. Starting as early as middle school, it is now common for young men to request nude or partially nude photos of young women via text message. More often than not, young men use these photos as a form of currency with their peers in an attempt to “prove” their manhood—demonstrating that they conform to heterosexual norms as well as showing that they are desirable. This type of behavior not only objectifies young women, but it also works to reinforce stereotypes about men’s never-ending quest for sex. Another gendered aspect of sexting is when young men also send unsolicited sexually explicit pictures of themselves to young women. Though this behavior is often dismissed as “boys being boys” or “youthful masculine exuberance,” it is a form of harassment and coercion (Salter, 2018). Condoning or excusing this behavior not only perpetuates the objectification of women but it also normalizes sexual aggression and ignores issues of consent. Research has shown that “sexually harassing behavior has become so normative that adolescents and young adults do not recognize [it] as a form of sexual violence” (Rodgers & Hust, 2019, p. 414). These taken-for-granted behaviors contribute to a dangerous culture where male dominance is excused and women’s autonomy and freedom is ignored.

Sexting is not the only way pornography has infiltrated the digital lives of young men. Social media has become a gateway to pornography and young men are now being exposed to it at younger and younger ages (Dines & Jensen, 2019). Research has shown that pornography shapes young men’s sexual tastes and the earlier they view porn the more likely they are to experience a host of negative consequences such as anxiety, depression, poor academic performance, and addictive behavior (Dines,

2019). As online porn has become more accessible and more explicit, research has shown that there is a greater desire for and participation in “rough” sexual activities (Vogels & O’Sullivan, 2019). Perhaps it comes as no surprise then that studies have shown that young men who regularly use pornography have difficulty developing sexually satisfying relationships in real life (Paul, 2006; Taylor, 2018).

Because sexualization is so prevalent in media it can be difficult to know where to begin in combatting its impact. However, providing people with opportunities to cultivate a range of interests that go beyond gendered stereotypes is a good start. Media literacy advocates should encourage public awareness of the dangers of screen time addiction as well as critical reflection on the media content and platforms we interact with on a daily basis. Engaging in civic discourse about media habits and preferences opens up a space for dialogue about the potential impact of media messages on our lives—particularly surrounding healthy forms of sexual exploration, boundaries, and consent. Asking users of commercial media to reflect on how media stereotypes make them feel about their own gender and sexual identities can foster introspection and, potentially, activism.

Alternative Media Production and Media Activism Around Issues of Media and Gender

It can be disheartening to think about the power pornified media culture has to shape our understanding of gender and sexuality. However, critical media literacy offers us the tools to challenge the organizations and institutions that continue to perpetuate gender inequity in the media. Educators, students, artists, activists, and public citizens all play a pivotal role in social change.

Educators and leaders of community organizations can use their forums to help empower others. Integrating critical media literacy lesson plans into the classroom or introducing key issues into a meeting can help raise awareness of gender-based inequality. Non-profit organizations such as *The Media Education Foundation*, *The Representation Project*, *The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in the Media*, *The Critical Media Project*, *Culture Reframed*, and *About-Face* offer a range of information, curricula, and resources on gender and media literacy. Beyond raising awareness and fostering critical media literacy skills, these organizations also offer concrete ways to get involved in the fight for social justice.

There are also media organizations and tools that help artists and everyday citizens tell stories that challenge the sexism, racism, and homophobia of commercial media. For example, in addition to being the leading distributor of independent films by and about women, *Women Make Movies* also offers webinars and workshops in an effort to cultivate more women producers, directors, and filmmakers. Likewise, the *GLAAD Media Institute* trains storytellers to help strengthen their media impact and accelerate acceptance for the LGBTQ community. *SparkMovement* is an anti-racist gender justice movement led by young women that works to end violence against women and girls while promoting girls’ healthy sexuality, self-empowerment, and well-being through

a number of creative actions. The SparkMovement blog provides young women with a forum to read and publish stories about themselves as well as an online tool-kit to produce activist theatre in their community. While social media and digital technologies make it possible for anyone to create blogs, memes, wikis, remixes, websites, podcasts, and videos on their own, working with non-profit organizations like these offers additional benefits like access to a broad network of likeminded individuals with similar goals for social change.

As previously stated, citizens can use social media as a quick and public way to voice concern and build coalitions. Social media campaigns like #TimesUp, #MeToo, and #BlackLivesMatter have been quite successful in raising awareness of important issues. However, it is not enough to post online, we must also take our concerns to the streets and voting booth. Boycotts of products and companies that support sexism, racism, and homophobia are powerful because they hit companies where it hurts the most: their bottom line. Public demonstrations, petitions, emails, letters, and phone calls are another way to hold executives and politicians accountable. In our schools and communities, we must advocate for policies that support gender equity and challenge porn culture. With our elected officials, we can work to establish legislation on the state and federal level that addresses toxic media culture. The UK's 2019 implementation of a ban on broadcast, online, and print advertisements that depict gender stereotypes is just one recent example of how we can change culture through media activism.

Although media activism takes time and energy, research shows that participants find it enjoyable and valuable as well as empowering (Bindig, 2013). In the current political and cultural environment the task might seem daunting. But every successful social movement in history faced strong opposition, difficult challenges, and resistance. The cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1977) noted that "hegemony is not a 'given' and permanent state of affairs... it has to be actively won and secured; it can also be lost" (p. 333). And Lull (2018) points out that "hegemony fails when dominant ideology is weaker than social resistance" (p. 36). Critical media literacy at its heart is an optimistic project because it recognizes that not only is social change possible, but it is actually happening all of the time. Ultimately a fully-developed approach to critical media literacy offers us the best path to achieving cultural autonomy in our highly mediated world.

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