"Navigating AI Through Critical Media Literacy" Workshop

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As part of the 2025 Civics of Technology conference, one of the workshops offered on Day 1 was "Navigating AI Through Critical Media Literacy" by Julianna Kowlessar, a PhD student at York University and a media literacy researcher. Kowlessar's Master's research looked at Ontario pre-service teachers' approaches to critical media literacy. Her research goal was to uncover effective strategies for future educators to teach critical media literacy. Her doctoral research will include conducting a mixed methods study to look at how to best support critical media literacy through teaching practices and learning, methods and resources.

Kowlessar's presentation posits that critical media literacy can facilitate a more evaluative understanding of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies and their impact on education. The key point of the presentation is that foundational critical media literacy skills are necessary to understand media technologies as a whole and its societal impacts. Once these skills are in place, students/individuals are better able to assess the impact of AI on society, specifically on their educational experiences.

I very much appreciated Kowlessar's practical approach to teaching critical media literacy, based on Kellner and Share's (2019) work, which is grounded in six core concepts:

- Social Constructivism
- Language/Semiotics
- Audience/Positionality
- Politics of Representation
- Production/Institutions
- Social and Environmental Justice

The goal is for students/individuals to use these six core concepts as guideposts to

understand and eventually evaluate their interactions with media, including AI. Concepts #1, #3 and #6 stood out, with respect to AI, as it is important to consider who is feeding and building the data banks for large language models, and in turn, the demographics of primary AI users, which influence the AI outputs (see: Audience/Positionality).

Kowlessar then went on to present Kellner and Share's six question prompts aligned to each of the six core concepts, which can be applied to analysis of AI's effects on education:

- Question 1: Reflects on "who" is responsible for generating a certain media text
- Question 2: Assesses the "how" in terms of its generation and distribution
- Question 3: Asks "how," but focuses on diverse interpretations of a media text
- Question 4: Inquires "what," concerning the ideas that have shaped the media text
- Question 5: Asks "why" to unpack the intent behind producing the media text
- Question 6: Challenges individuals to ask "whom" a given advantage of disadvantage

From here, these questions can prompt AI-specific questioning like:

- Who is responsible for creating specific genAI models?
- How are AI models generated and distributed to the public? In the education system?

I think these core concept questions also align well with EDI concepts in teaching, which consider identity, power, privilege, as well as bias, both implicit and explicit.

Kowlessar ended her presentation with a concluding question: **Are individuals well-equipped to develop and apply critical media literacy skills to ensure that they can effectively navigate AI technologies?** I thought this was a great question that could be modified as part of a pre-assessment to determine students' ability to critically evaluate the impacts of AI, potentially at the start of a course or program.

References

Douglas, Kellner & Share, Jeff. (2019). The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media & Transforming Education. 10.1163/9789004404533.

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