(Re)conceptualizing digital literacies before and after the election of Trump

Mark A. Sulzer

School of Education, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA

Abstract

Purpose – As part of a larger global phenomenon, the election of Donald Trump in the USA represents a crucial moment for the (re)conceptualization of digital literacies. The purpose of this paper is to build theory with respect to what this moment means for English education.

Design/methodology/approach – This teacher reflection focuses on what digital literacies meant for my teaching before and after the 2016 election. Using a before-and-after format, I argue that the before conceptualization of digital literacies, while still relevant and useful for introducing many important ideas to English educators, was missing a direct treatment of political power. The after conceptualization takes up this topic.

Findings – Themes taken up in the before section involve a parallel between digital literacies and disciplinary literacies and a distinction between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 interfaces. Themes in the after section address the propensity for governments and other well-resourced groups to occupy Web 2.0 environments for their own ends. Methods for accomplishing these ends involve restricting, surveilling and targeting flows of information and enacting three populist practices via internet trolling: aggregating the unmet demands of disparate groups, establishing popular subjectivity and dichotomizing the social space through the persistent construction of the enemy.

Research limitations/implications – A critically conscious approach to digital literacies must consider the ways in which political entities occupy digital environments.

Practical implications – Further research should be done in English education classrooms to understand the ways in which individual online meaning making becomes entangled within a nexus of political activity. Further research should investigate how online meaning making intersects with political power.

Originality/value – The role of political entities is often downplayed or ignored in discussions of digital literacies. In an age of alternative facts, fake news and echo chambers, it is important to foreground the interplay between the social, the political and the digital in contemporary meaning making. This contribution offers concepts that can be taken up and expanded, as well as a set of questions for English educators to use in framing a critically conscious conversation about digital literacies.

Keywords Literacy, Literacy teaching, New literacies, English language arts, Critical literacy, Digital literacy, Digital literacies, Critical digital literacies, Populism

November 9, 2016 began a new reality for American politics, one with Donald Trump as President-elect of the USA. Just a day earlier, the November 8 reality was that the interrelated rhetorics of nativism, nationalism, sexism, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia and anti-immigration would likely not end in Trump’s election, although the electoral vote would be close (FiveThirtyEight, 2016). By November 9, it was clear that populism had once again taken hold in the USA. While populism has been a recurrent modality of US politics (Formisano, 2008), the 2016 election cycle demonstrated the power of digital media in its propagation. The online presence of white supremacist groups such as the alt-right, the proliferation of fake news stories from various anonymous sources, the seemingly endless
string of leaked emails from WikiLeaks, the quick and systematic spin through social media and Donald Trump’s infamous Twitter account all played prominent roles in shaping the outcome of the election. As someone who studies literacies, the upshot for me was that I needed to reassess my approach to, and understanding of, digital literacies.

Beyond the election of Trump, similar populist movements have emerged across multiple countries and contexts, from European countries (Vieten and Poynting, 2016) to Australia and New Zealand (Moffitt, 2017) to uprisings such as Brexit (Gusterson, 2017). While the success of these movements has relied on political figures evoking resentment in reaction to globalization (Wodak, 2017), the digital age has introduced new contexts for exploiting such resentment.

As I worked with high school students and the college students who will one day be their English teachers, I wondered about the implications of the current political moment for them. How does this moment change the landscape of English education?

In the immediate wake of the election, this question was at the forefront of my mind. In the evening after the election, I met with my Reading, Writing and Critical Literacies class – a group of future English educators at the beginning of their teacher education program. We had a fishbowl discussion framed around the question, “What does the election result mean for you as a future English educator?” The goals of the course itself were to explore what it means to be producers and consumers of texts and ultimately imagine implications for pedagogy. In our previous in-class discussions, we had explored literacies from a sociocultural standpoint, including conceptualizations of reading comprehension (Aukerman, 2008), of literacies as ideological practices rather than autonomous skills (Street, 1984), and of culture, identity and power in English education (Alvermann, 2002).

The fishbowl discussion was spirited, heated at times and full of insight. At the time, I viewed the discussion as positive. We teased apart themes of bullying, lying and gaslighting; social constructs such as race and gender figured prominently; and the class dynamic itself, with a large majority in the anti-Trump camp and a small minority in the pro-Trump camp, was put into conversation.

But upon reflection in the coming weeks, I felt increasingly unsettled with how our discussion went. Something was missing. I kept coming back to the idea that the discussion did not substantively address the interplay between digital environments and the political moment. What was left undertheorized was power: that is, the ways in which digital environments open up new strategies for governments and other well-resourced groups to forward their agendas. My goal in this article is to build theory with respect to power in digital environments. The following discussion is organized in a before-and-after format, emphasizing that my before conceptualization of digital literacies, while still relevant and useful for introducing many important ideas to my students, was missing a direct treatment of political power in digital environments, something I address in the after conceptualization. I conclude by offering a more critically conscious framing of digital literacies.

Before

My approach to digital literacies at the time

Before 2016, I envisioned digital literacies as fitting within a constellation of three bodies of work. The first was the New Literacy Studies (NLS) (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2000; Street, 2003), a line of scholarship foregrounding a paradigm shift in how literacies have been conceived by scholars and teachers, with a focus on the social conditions out of which meaning making arises. I was drawn to this paradigmatic shift for its positioning of literacy as “a repertoire of changing practices for communicating purposefully in multiple social and
cultural contexts” (Mills, 2010, p. 247). In this way, digital environments could be understood as various social and cultural contexts for meaning making, complete with their own repertoires of changing practices.

The second was multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996), a body of work, closely related to the NLS, emphasizing a pedagogical approach to literacy that accounts for the cultural and linguistic diversity within “increasingly globalized societies” and “the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies” (p. 61). Drawing on this work, digital literacies can be imagined as interconnected with globalization, with digital texts as conduits for accessing the cultural and linguistic diversity of the world, and by extension, for accessing work, power and community.

The third was new literacies (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011), a body of work maintaining the paradigmatic shift of the NLS while also emphasizing an ontological shift. Regarding ontology, Lankshear and Knobel (2011) argue that “[new literacies] consist of a different kind of ‘stuff’ from conventional literacies we have known in the past” (p. 28). For example, meaning making in the digital sense traverses time and space via “encoded texts” (p. 40), i.e. texts that have been freed from their original context and don’t depend on people to transport them.

The nuanced differences within these bodies of work are helpful in pursuing the changing complexities of meaning making in digital environments. For example, embracing the new as a paradigmatic shift toward the social, as in NLS, implies one line of inquiry (e.g. What role does social interaction play in making meaning in digital environments?); and embracing new as an ontological shift, as in new literacies, implies another, one that calls forth the changing “stuff” of digital technologies for the production and consumption of texts (e.g. What do the affordances of, for example, YouTube imply for readers and writers as opposed to the affordances of, say, Facebook – and also as opposed to traditional print formats?).

With this scholarship in mind, I framed digital literacies in two ways. First, I saw digital literacies as running parallel to disciplinary literacies. Although not the same, some of the concepts circulating within disciplinary literacies seemed also applicable to digital literacies. Second, I approached digital literacies through the lens of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009), highlighting Web 2.0 technologies as introducing a range of affordances and challenges that educators should consider. I turn to these ideas in separate sections below to produce a broad portrait of my thinking at the time.

The digital as disciplinary. Disciplinary literacies are founded on the idea that different academic disciplines call on different knowledges, language conventions, and modalities of thought. Drawing a parallel to digital literacies, I aligned with Gee and Hayes’s (2011) emphasis on “specialized knowledge and language” arising from digital environments (p. 88). Knowing what hashtags are and how to use them on Twitter, understanding how to communicate and coordinate with team members in a video game, and demonstrating proficiency with the highly situated nature of “proper etiquette” on various online communication forums: these are all examples of specialized knowledge and language that a disciplinary understanding of digital literacies tends to highlight. From a teaching standpoint, a clear parallel could be drawn between the conventions of meaning making emerging from digital environments to the conventions of meaning making emerging from particular disciplines (e.g. science, art, English). Addressing issues as a scientist would involve playing by a set of implicit and explicit rules; likewise, anyone who successfully navigates the digital world (e.g. Facebook) must be tapping into some set of socially and culturally constructed guidelines for how to do so. Following Lankshear and Knobel (2011), I saw “the ‘non-print’ bits, like values and gestures, context and meaning, actions and objects,
talk and interaction, tools and spaces” (p.13) as inseparable from digital texts. Playing video games, using services such as Google or Netflix, and participating in social media all represent ways of being in the digital world.

I tempered this understanding with Leander and Boldt’s (2013) concern that concepts emerging from NLS, primarily the notion of “multiliteracies,” have directed attention of the field to texts-as-endpoints as opposed to texts as emergent from social practices. In other words, the sociocultural underpinnings of NLS have tended to produce, ironically, an overly text-centric view of literacy. Rather than driving toward a textual endpoint in more or less rational ways, which is “a domestification that subtracts movement, indeterminacy, and emergent potential from the picture” (p. 24), literacies involve elements not so easily rationalized away. Thus, with digital literacies, I tried to avoid working backward from any particular family of digital texts. While I often explored ideas by calling on particular digital texts (e.g. on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), I tried to frame discussions that included these interfaces while not being bound by them – e.g. How do digital environments shape your social world, your relationships and your desires?

Turning an eye toward practice, I drew on Moje’s (2015) four-part framework for disciplinary literacy: engage, elicit/engineer, examine and evaluate. We should engage with digital environments by using social media and video games and blogs, among others, to shape our intuition. We should elicit knowledge of the digital domain by allowing students a space to demonstrate their insights about, for example, social media; and we should engineer in-class activities that would offer students space to exercise and extend their knowledge. We should examine digital “ways with words” by looking at how people use digital interfaces to perform identities and achieve their goals. Finally, English educators should evaluate uses of language by looking at why, when and how they emerge in digital environments.

Like disciplinary literacy generally, casting the digital as disciplinary involved attention to “epistemic understandings” and “routine practices” (Moje, 2015, p. 257) emerging from digital environments. To characterize these digital environments with more precision, I relied on the terminology of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, addressed below.

**Web 1.0 and Web 2.0.** Within scholarship on digital literacies is an important distinction between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies. These terms signal a qualitatively different set of affordances for literacy practices. Broadly, Web 1.0 refers to the read-only model of the internet, while Web 2.0 refers to interfaces that are built on the premise of user participation (O’Reilly, 2006). For example, an online encyclopedia that is essentially a digitized version of the print version, e.g. Britannica Online as the digitization of Encyclopedia Britannica, would be Web 1.0. An online encyclopedia that depends on user participation to produce content, such as Wikipedia, would be Web 2.0. However, the dividing line between the two can be fuzzy, as O’Reilly (2006) explains, “Like many important concepts, Web 2.0 doesn’t have a hard boundary, but rather, a gravitational core” (para. 8). For example, a newspaper site like The New York Times presents information in a digitized version, similar to what would be available in a print version of the newspaper. That dynamic is suggestive of Web 1.0. However, the online version of The New York Times has comment sections for the articles, a continuously updated list of what stories are popular, and a way to share stories via social media. In addition, the company collects data related to user clicks for a variety of purposes. These features rely on Web 2.0 principles in that users are not merely passive recipients, but perpetual creators, disseminators and evaluators of content.

On the side that is clearly Web 2.0 are social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter and YouTube. Users are the primary content producers for these sites. Search engines such as Google or Bing are similarly user dependent in that their search algorithms are responsive to, and become refined through, user data.
For sociocultural scholarship on digital literacies, the online spaces designed with Web 2.0 principles of interactivity, participation and decentralization have provided an evolving context for analysis. Considering these digital contexts, Duffy (2008) contends that a new “learning ecology” has emerged and that “some care should be taken to think deeply about the impacts of Web 2.0 on the processes and practices of pedagogy” (p. 119). Applying the particular affordances of Web 2.0 in the classroom compels teachers to connect their technological knowledge to particular pedagogical stances (Mishra and Koehler, 2006). Such application involves framing out literacy engagements using, e.g. blogs, wikis and podcasts. These digital tools provide new methods for giving feedback to students and new ways to grade student work by appealing to, for example, multimodality, hypertextuality and interactivity (Beach, Clemens, and Jamsen, 2009).

Modalities of literacy learning, such as digital storytelling (Robin, 2008), m-learning, i.e. using mobile devices to learn (Cochrane and Bateman, 2010) and video games (Apperley and Beavis, 2011), introduce a set of pedagogical potentials for teachers and students. These modalities also present possibilities for traditionally underserved student populations. For example, Sykes et al. (2008) argue that digital environments offer L2 learners meaningful contexts for language development. Giving an example of language usages within a MMOG, or a massively multiplayer online game, the authors observe that:

To be a highly skilled player in World of Warcraft [a MMOG], one must not only be able to complete quests, gain assets, and navigate through three continents of geographic space, but also to interact with others in an appropriate manner utilizing the norms established by expert players of the game. (p. 535)

Unlike many traditional school contexts, students produce and consume texts with real audiences in real-time, allowing them to engage with language as a genuine social practice. Thus, within and through these digital environments, Sykes et al. (2008) argue, student agency can potentially “evolve beyond the confines of the subject-position associated with the conventional institutional identity of student” (p. 539).

Digital tools establish new subject-positions through what Beach (2012) calls “collaborative knowledge construction” (p. 49). Discussion forums, social media, group annotation tools, wikis and blogs all provide platforms for qualitatively different types of participation. For example, Ito et al. (2008) highlight modes of youth participation, including “hanging out” (picking up social and technological skills), “messing around” (exploring new interfaces and personal interests) or “geeking out” (gaining an esteemed reputation in a specialized knowledge group) (pp. 1-2). Digital environments, therefore, are intimately related to not just affordances in terms of what one can do, but affordances in terms of what and how one can be.

Digital literacies compel educationists to re-conceptualize what it means to do school. In terms of what that might mean for teachers, I encouraged my students to consider their stance toward digital media. Leander (2009) describes four stances toward digital media often taken up by teachers: resistance, meaning only conventional print literacies should be taken up; replacement, meaning traditional texts should be supplanted with digital texts; return, meaning digital texts should be taken up but understood through concepts belonging to conventional print literacy; and remediation, meaning the generic conventions, structures and practices of traditional literacies are taken up, folded into or re-mediated through digital affordances (pp. 148-149). These stances encompass a range of attitudes, dispositions and theories emerging from the interplay between schooling practices and digital media. In framing discussions with future English educators, I encouraged my students to work through their own stances.
The material above represents a broad portrait of my thinking on digital literacies before the 2016 US presidential election. What was largely downplayed, if not missing, from my thinking was the role of governments and other well-resourced groups in digital spaces. In using the collective term governments and other well-resourced groups, my goal is to call attention to political power and the wielding of such power via digital environments.

Governments refer to the activities of the more or less autonomous bureaucratic systems driving decision-making processes within cities, states, provinces, territories or countries; and governments can also refer to different parts of a governmental infrastructure operating under the auspices of a governing body, e.g. in the USA, the CIA, the NSA or the FBI (Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, respectively).

Well-resourced groups refer to any organizations outside of direct governmental control that nevertheless possess resources enough to promote an agenda on a wide scale. Examples include large corporations, presidential campaigns and terrorist organizations. Additionally, resourced is meant in a broad sense that is not limited to monetary resources but could also include, for example, access to software tools that amplify an entity’s online presence or expertise in executing quick messaging strategies via social media (e.g. with Twitter bots).

In using the term, my intention is to insert into the discussion the increasingly sophisticated methods by which Web 2.0 technologies are being taken up by governments and other well-resourced groups to shape national perceptions. While methods are always quickly evolving, I characterize two below:

1. co-opting Web 2.0 spaces; and
2. enacting populist practices via trolling.

Co-optation of Web 2.0 spaces. Digital tools provide new affordances for communication, which are often imagined as having a democratizing effect. For example, writing on the relationship between digital media and the Arab Spring, Howard and Hussain (2013) note:

Social protests in the Arab world have spread across North Africa and the Middle East, largely because digital media allowed communities to realize that they shared grievances and because they nurtured transportable strategies for mobilizing against dictators. (p. 3)

The digital space allowed for sharing and strategizing by peoples who might otherwise not have access to each other’s experiences and knowledges. However, while some were using digital tools to enact democratic principles of free speech, assembly and dissent, “autocratic regimes nurtured information management strategies to control and co-opt these social movements” (p. 4). Thus, the digital affordances aligning with democratic practices are always offset by the digital affordances aligning with autocratic control.

Batouli (2004) argues that capabilities of authoritarian regimes are far greater than the capabilities of more individuated internet users. Evoking the story of David and Goliath, Batouli writes:

Many modern advocates of absolute freedom and democracy around the globe believe that the Internet is their slingshot, a weapon they can use to topple the large, daunting authoritarian regimes around the world […] But as it is easily accessible and inanimate, the authoritarian Goliaths that the Internet is aimed at subverting have also gotten their hands on this tool, creating a two-sided Web war. (p. 5)
Using examples from China and Iran, Batouli (2004) demonstrates that digital environments provide ways for dystopian-level systematicity in subverting political dissent. Restricting available information, surveilling online activity, and targeting dissidents are among the methods that governments and other well-resourced groups use to quash uprisings. Contrast that capability with the capability of an individual internet user, who in all likelihood does not wield counterbalancing resources.

In the 2016 presidential election in the USA, for example, consider the asymmetrical power relationship between individual voters and entities wishing to influence them. The widely held view, coming from 17 US intelligence agencies, is that Russia interfered in the 2016 US election, using classic methods of cyber-intrusion coupled with an influence campaign involving, according to the testimony of Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, “classical propaganda, disinformation, fake news” (as cited in Naylor, 2017). For example, while Russian state actors hacked both major parties in the USA, they released information only from the side of the Democrats in an effort to bolster Trump, the Republican candidate. To maximize influence, Russian state actors then used WikiLeaks as a platform for global dissemination (Sanger and Shane, 2016). Conspiracy theories and “fake news” based on hacked information were then widely circulated by Russian Twitter bots (automated accounts posing as real people) as well as actual people working for the Russian Government (O’Connor and Schneider, 2017), oftentimes posing as pro-Trump US citizens (Bertrand, 2016). It should be noted, of course, that the USA has also interfered in other nations’ elections, and to borrow a line from Senator Thom Tillis, “We [the USA] live in a big glass house, and there are a lot of rocks to throw” (as cited by Naylor, 2017).

This dissolution of boundaries has implications for what Kim (2016) calls transcultural digital literacies in English education, a concept which “accounts for the nascent phenomenon of digitally mediated learning practices in the age of globalization and the Internet” (p. 204). These learning practices have implications for how students learn about themselves and their relationship to a multicultural world. The 2016 US election demonstrated, however, that digitally mediated learning spaces are of high interest to governments and other well-resourced groups. As digital environments allow for an individual to enter into and cross-complex cultural spaces, they also allow for forces beyond the individual to systematically shape the meaning making ecosystem.

From a digital literacies perspective, the main takeaway is that the social dynamics stemming from Web 2.0 technologies can potentially be co-opted by state actors in an effort to amass and maintain power. Thus, individuals entering into the social atmosphere of digital environments should be keenly aware that such social situations likely include entities (e.g. bots or actual people) with ulterior motives. I approach implications for English education below, but first, I offer another way in which the 2016 US election of Trump made me reconsider digital literacies: the enactment of populist practices via internet trolling.

*Enacting populist practices via internet trolling.* My goal in this section is to articulate a working definition of populism and describe the dynamic interplay between populism and digital environments. For a working definition of populism, I draw on Laclau’s (2005) piece, “Populism: What’s in a Name?” As an opening premise, Laclau reasons that populism should not be imagined as operating on the same level as political movements or ideologies (such as fascism, liberalism or communism) because it drives toward futile discussions of what movements/ideologies should be considered populist versus not populist. Rather than leading to questions about what is or is not populist, Laclau arrives at a different question: “to what extent is a movement populist?” (p. 45). Populism therefore refers to a set of political
practices that can be taken up equally by, for example, a fascist movement or a liberal movement.

Laclau (2005) describes three interrelated populist practices that are helpful in unpacking the relationship between digital environments and populism. The first practice is the forging of *equivalential chains*. These chains are forged when particular, unfulfilled social demands of disparate groups “reaggregate themselves” with not the particulars of the social demands, but with the general notion that the demands have gone unmet. The second practice, building *popular subjectivity*, involves the constitution of the subject on the basis of “a logic of equivalence” (p. 37), and arises in popular discourse through appeals to “the people”. These appeals consolidate varied subjective experiences into a singular moniker, and thus serve to maintenance equivalential chains. The third practice concerns *dichotomous construction*, which involves the formation of an “internal frontier” (p. 38) in the social space via the “discursive construction of an enemy” (p. 39).

Through social media and other digital interfaces, these three populist practices became inseparable from US presidential politics in 2016. Equivalential chains, popular subjectivity and dichotomous construction emerged as disparate groups melded their grievances together, which included police officers responding to “what many officers see as growing anti-police sentiment” (Kaste, 2016), white evangelicals citing “[Trump’s] promise to appoint Supreme Court justices who would overturn Roe v. Wade” (Baily, 2016), white supremacists who see Donald Trump as a “last stand” for “[controlling] the culture of politics” (Holston, 2016), white working class voters harboring racist fears of “cultural displacement” coupled with “economic hardship” (Cox, Lienesch, and Jones, 2017), and anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim groups stimulated by “a growing fear about terrorism and terror attacks” (Eversley, 2017). These groups are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and there are certainly individuals who overlap with some or all of them, but the larger point is that digital environments, particularly social media, mediated these populist practices. Through digital interfaces, disparate groups with unmet social demands are more accessible to each other, and their dissatisfaction can be pooled much more readily.

The predominate technique of the Trump campaign to maintain these populist practices, I argue, was through “trolling”. As described in Phillips’s (2015) ethnographic work on internet trolls, trolling is a way of being online that involves pursuing “lulz”, a term signifying enjoyment derived from provoking an adversary. Trolling was a main feature of the campaign, leading Dave Chappelle, in his *Saturday Night Live* monologue delivered the week of the election, to observe that “America has done it. We’ve actually elected an Internet troll as our president”. I am not suggesting that Donald Trump belongs to the group of self-identified, subcultural trolls that inhabit 4Chan’s /b/ board, YouTube comment sections, or various threads on Reddit. However, the Trump campaign took up many facets of trolling behavior both in method and worldview.

In terms of method, trolls attempt to provoke their targets with the use of shocking, disturbing and offensive posts. Phillips (2015) argues that trolling is a calculated method of inserting chaos to the conversation, thereby creating the context for a new round of provocations. In terms of worldview, trolling behavior is a digital manifestation of androcentrism, wherein sexism, misogyny and racism are naturalized; so-called “male rationality” is favored over so-called “female emotionalism”; and there is an overt emphasis on “winning” by “successfully exerting dominance over a given adversary” (Phillips, 2015, p. 124). The Trump campaign – from fallout of the you-can-do-anything bus tape to the aggression against a Gold Star family to the threatening of news media to the claim that
“We’re going to win so much, you’re going to be so sick and tired of winning” – squarely aligned with this worldview.

Trolling was the central strategy of the Trump campaign for enacting populist practices. Consider the tenacious use of Twitter to broadcast sensationalist lines to provoke feelings of confusion, anger, disbelief, alarm and indignation among Trump adversaries, a dynamic which, because propagated by the then Republican nominee, would itself become a news story and thus occupy an outsized space in the news cycle. Trump used provocative tweets to remind his supporters of a laundry list of enemies: the Republican establishment who are “dishonest” and “could not stop Obama (twice)”; the “mainstream media” that circulate “#FakeNews”; the courts which are “disgraceful”, “horrible” and “dangerous”; Bill and Hillary Clinton who are “the real predators”, and the “job killing”, Trans-Pacific Partnership, among others (see Lee and Quealy, 2017 for a detailed list). While it may be tempting to dismiss such insults as immature rantings, I argue that these digital provocations provide an efficient means for the perpetual construction of the enemy and, relatedly, the perpetual maintenance of equivalential chains and consolidation of popular subjectivity.

In an essay about attending a Trump rally, Eggers (2016) was reminded of a troll-ish American comedian, Andrew Dice Clay, because the audience seemed taken by the “forbidden delight in hearing highly inappropriate things spoken into a microphone” (para. 73). This “forbidden delight” became a way of maintaining a sense of solidarity as supporters assumed a common stance against all things “politically correct”. To be sure, Trump is not the first populist figure to troll his opponents, but what was demonstrated by the Trump campaign is that in the digital age, trolling via social media is a potent technique for enacting populist practices. In the context of teacher education, such language practices could be taken up through ongoing discussions about power, digital tools and the relationship between the two. As these tools allow for the aggregation of voices from across the globe, the idea of whose voice is present and whose voice is absent, whose voice is amplified and whose voice is ignored, and whose voice is championed and whose voice is mocked is of upmost importance in framing critical inquiries about why voices are present or absent, why they are amplified or ignored and why they are championed or mocked. Eggers’s (2016) notion of “forbidden delight” grants a clear entry point for discussing the language practice of trolling and how voices interact with each other in the digital age.

Conclusion

Above, I have outlined my thinking about digital literacies before and after the election of Trump. While I still see the disciplinary/digital parallel and the affordances of Web 2.0 technologies as highly relevant, I supplement these ideas with a more overt treatment of political power in digital environments. For example, my previous treatment of Web 2.0 technologies tended to foreground the social practices of individuals within “interest-driven networks” (Ito et al., 2008) rather unpacking why governments and other well-resourced groups would want to shape such networks – and what methods they might use to do so. Informing this new direction in my teaching is software studies (Berry, 2011; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; Manovich, 2013), critical software studies (Lynch, 2015a, 2015b) and critical digital literacies (Avila and Pandya, 2013).

First, the field of software studies emphasizes the “softwarization” (Manovich, 2013) of daily life. Virtually all lived experiences in contemporary society are touched in one way or another by software, which can be imagined as a superstructure of daily lived experience that is in a constant state of flux and flow as algorithms, applications and
interfaces emerge, upgrade and evolve. Kitchin and Dodge (2011) coin the term *everyware* to emphasize the pervasive presence of software interactions that aim to “augment aspects of everyday life and activities by adding value through the embedding of sensors and some degree of decision-making capacity in everyday objects and infrastructures rendering them interactive and smart, yet also mundane and routine” (p. 217). From a literacy pedagogy perspective, the field of software studies highlights the need to understand how meaning making within daily lived experience is structured through software.

Second, the field of critical software studies directly addresses the power dynamics that shape softwarization in educational spaces, particularly those related to neoliberal education policies aimed at “disruptive innovation” in K-12 education. These supposed innovations are driven by research funding from the very businesses seeking to “prove” the educative value of their products. Lynch (2015a) argues that such an environment creates an “orthodoxy of optimism” around technology in schools, leaving critical interpretations at the margins of the discussion. Lynch (2015b) writes:

[...] software is created by human beings with ideologies, epistemologies, and bottom lines [...]

When powering education, software—to some degree—enacts the pedagogical assumptions and ideologies of those who produce and promote it, transforming teaching and learning into something the logic of the market can solve through the ontology of software space.

From a teacher education perspective, the “ontology of the software space” is a focal point for criticality. As preservice teachers consider how their own literacies and their future students’ literacies are shaped by software, they can enter into conversations about what software is and how it is implicated in societal power hierarchies.

Finally, the field of critical digital literacies emphasizes the “skills and practices that lead to the creation of digital texts that interrogate the world [and] also allow and foster interrogation of digital, multimedia texts” (Ávila and Pandya, 2013, p. 3). Similar to Street’s (1984) distinction between autonomous and ideological models of literacy, critical digital literacies attend to the ideologies mediated through the production and consumption of digital texts. Proponents of critical digital literacies emphasize the need to not only include but also go beyond functional skills associated with digital media (Watulak and Kinzer, 2013).

Informed by the scholarship above, my framing became more generative for pursuing criticality about digital environments. I began this reflection by describing an ultimately unsatisfying classroom conversation the night after the 2016 US election in my class on Reading, Writing and Critical Literacies. A year later in the same class, the conversations about digital environments and the current political moment took a more satisfying turn. Although others will undoubtedly have ideas to add (as will I in each iteration of the class), I conclude this reflection by offering ideas for framing a critical conversation about the digital world. I acknowledge this framing is far from perfect, and I do not wish to position this framing as “correct” or exhaustive or definitive, but rather as a point-in-time snapshot of my teaching and an entry point for continued reflection about (critical) digital literacies in English education and beyond:

- **Framing Idea One: Representation.** How does software (re)present the world to its users? What’s missing in the representation? Why?

My intent with these questions was to put large search engines such as Google, as well as social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter, at the center of the discussion. In a group activity, I asked students to search for topics through Google and look at the news sources
available through Facebook and Twitter. Examples from the various groups were often related to the representation of race, gender and class, e.g. one group noticed that typing “cute girl hairstyles” into Google Images yielded primarily, almost exclusively, images of white girls’ hair. Another angle on the question was on how recent news events were represented on dubious news sites that were then made readily available through Twitter and Facebook. Important to this discussion was the idea that algorithms that power these digital platforms are not value neutral but instead come to mirror the ideologies that are fed into them:

- **Framing Idea Two: Access.** How is information made available in the digital age? Who has access to what – and to what degree?

My intent with these questions was to foreground participation structures in digital environments. Several groups brought up the digital divide that precludes many individuals – particularly from underserved communities – from being participants in digital spaces. One observation was that issues such as net neutrality will potentially add new layers to the divide, rendering access as tiered rather than binary. Important to the discussion was the consideration of who is left in and out as readers in the digital age, whose access is complete and whose is qualified:

- **Framing Idea Three: Contestation.** How are meanings contested within digital environments? Why might governments and other well-resourced groups be interested in influencing online debates over meaning? What methods do they use?

My intent with these questions was to highlight the concerted efforts of governments, news organizations and more loosely organized groups such as the alt-right to shape public perceptions to fit their goals. One example that came from this framing was the #Manysides hashtag that emerged after the Charlottesville protest which resulted in the death of Heather Heyer. The hashtag originated when President Trump drew a moral equivalence between the white supremacists who were marching in Charlottesville and the people protesting them, implying “many sides” were responsible for Heyer’s death. Hashtags such as these are deeply infested with automated bots and human propagandists attempting to influence what meanings are ascribed to an event, person, policy or utterance. Important to this discussion is the idea that literacy pedagogy must be responsive to the new and always evolving methods through which governments and other well-resourced groups occupy, and operate within, digital environments.

**References**


**Further reading**


**Corresponding author**

Mark A. Sulzer can be contacted at: mark.sulzer@uc.edu

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: [www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com