

Chapter 14

Digital Literacy and Cultural Mediations to the Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the digital divide from the perspective of education and culture and highlights the forms in which the problem is presented in Brazil, understanding that it is not exclusive to this context. Given the complex challenges to digital inclusion in the context of globalization, the chapter emphasizes that for children and young people to be able to appropriate new technologies and languages in a significant manner, the promotion of digital literacy should be realized with respect to the concept of multiliteracies. Digital inclusion means much more than access to technologies and is understood as one of the fronts in the struggle against poverty and inequality. The authors propose that the understanding of the digital divide be enriched with the valorization of cultural mediations in the construction of digital literacy. In this sense, a culturalist perspective of media education can promote digital inclusion that is an experience of citizenship, belonging, and critical and creative participation of children and young people in the culture.

INTRODUCTION

In the early days of the popularization of personal computers in the 1980s, many people spoke of the infinite potential of the information highway that promised egalitarian and multidirectional communication among all peoples, groups, and nations. But

another metaphor, critical of the naive optimism of the early years, did not take long to appear: that of the digital divide. How can the abyss that separates the digitally literate from the digitally illiterate—commonly understood as those excluded from the technological promise—be gapped? What other image could represent this tension in an alternative

form, not as an unpassable chasm but as a space to be traversed? A river, which both separates and unites? A sea of currents that at once flow together and apart? How can this river be crossed, this sea be navigated?

This chapter proposes to discuss this problem—the distance between those who have and those who do not have complete access to the archives of culture made available by the media and the possibilities of recreating them critically. We focus on the new configurations that the problem takes with the intensification of the presence of digital technologies in education and culture. Our discussion seeks to identify possible contributions to the dilemmas of media education and of digital literacy that emerge from the Brazilian scene—a country of continental dimensions, where the pulsation of globalized media culture co-exists with a strong and sometimes preliterate popular culture, often in the same city and just a few blocks away. Our anchor in the problems as they are presented in Brazil does not mean, however, that we see the Brazilian or Latin American context as exclusive.

The diversity of semiotic practices and dislocations resulting from the forms by which industrial culture was incorporated into local contexts has challenged Brazilian thinkers for a number of decades. Concepts such as syncretism and cultural anthropophagy marked sociological, anthropological, and literary thinking in the country during the past century, in the search to understand the tensions between the “local” and “global” images and narratives, tensions that are at times generative and at times paralyzing. Paulo Freire’s (2000) proposal for a pedagogy of liberation, with its emphasis on a dialogical methodology that would be a space for a radical and micropolitical criticism of oppression, continues to inspire a large number of educational experiences, in and outside of schools. Nevertheless, although these conceptual proposals are on the horizon of an

increasing number of media education practices, they are rarely explicit.

This chapter identifies a number of theoretical themes and concepts that have been instigating and challenging the field of media education in Brazil. The digital divide will be understood as the contradiction between digital exclusion and inclusion, recognizing however, that one is not always opposed to the other. We will focus on concepts associated with practices that strive to establish a digital inclusion that transcends a merely operational access to machines and programs, that is, inclusion that is also political, social, and cultural—and thus meets the broad needs of education.

It is first necessary to locate the place from where we write, both from a theoretical as well as a geographic perspective. Our reflection about this theme is based on the Brazilian condition, although we believe that many of the issues that we will discuss here are analogous to those found in other countries at the periphery of capitalism. We are both professors and researchers working at the interface between education and communication in a large federal, public university. For this reason we feel comfortable speaking about the issue of the digital divide, since it would be impossible to consider the relationship between the media and education in our country without recognizing the social inequality, made evident in statistical data presented below. It is also necessary to recognize that exclusion is far from the only theme discussed in Brazilian or Latin American academic spaces that work with media education. We will thus attempt to consider the material precariousness in our country and the challenges that it creates for digital education, while highlighting those ideas, themes, and processes that, being fruit of the cultural singularity of our context, can contribute in a positive way to considering digital literacy and the digital divide.

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