CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY IN THE AGE OF THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY
Challenges, Strategies, and Rewards

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Despite the need, media literacy is not a common experience in the United States. While there have been efforts to incorporate media literacy in K–12 education, research suggests media literacy courses are limited in American colleges and universities. This article explores the obstacles presented by the neoliberal university and offers strategies for cultivating critical media literacy in higher education.

"Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will."

—Antonio Gramsci

INTRODUCTION

Despite a passionate community of advocates, media literacy has yet to be fully understood or embraced throughout the United States. Yet over the past few months, media literacy has been gaining national attention due to the changing political landscape. On February 19, 2017, CNN featured a segment entitled "Democracy Demands Media Literacy." Since then, media literacy has also been featured on subsequent CNN segments and in *The New York Times*. My initial reaction to the recent mainstream coverage of media literacy was one of optimism—perhaps this increased attention will help media literacy become part of the everyday vocabulary of the American public. At the same time, Antonio Gramsci reminds me that even in a moment of hopefulness, it is essential to acknowledge the institutional forces that impede media literacy from becoming a universal experience throughout the United States.

Media literacy is not absent from public discourse because Americans shun media. In fact, on average U.S. adults spend 10 hours and 39 minutes consuming media—an hour increase from the previous year (Lynch, 2016). Likewise, on average young people spend almost 9 hours a day consuming media (Common Sense

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Media, 2015).[1] These statistics suggest that in the digital age, media have become inescapable. They play a central role in our work, leisure, and civic participation. Thus, we need media literacy to provide "the tools through which to examine the political, cultural, historical, economic and social ramifications of all media in a holistic way" (Frechette, 2014, p. 14).

Since media have such a widespread impact on our individual and collective experiences, one might expect media education to be fully embedded in our schools, colleges, and universities. However, the United States fails to incorporate media literacy in its educational institutions in any unified or cohesive way (Bindig, 2016; Druick, 2016). When media literacy is present in the classroom, it is more likely to be introduced in primary and secondary schools than in colleges and universities (Schmidt, 2012). This is due largely in part to the fact that each state has adopted some element of media literacy into its educational curriculum (CIC Stats, 2006). Despite these mandates, K–12 educators have reported that media literacy is not receiving the attention it deserves in schools (Cable in the Classroom Report, 2006). In fact, these reports suggest that the responsibility for implementing media literacy falls on individual teachers and technology specialists (Cable in the Classroom Report, 2006). Furthermore, even when there is a commitment to media literacy in the K–12 classroom, there is a lack of extensive and sustained training available to these practitioners (Buckingham, 2001; Schmidt, 2013). Together these factors contribute to K–12 media literacy education that varies wildly from state to state, but also district to district, and classroom to classroom (Bindig, 2016).

While media literacy in K–12 education is present but uneven, research suggests it is "limited" within the context of American higher education (Schmidt, 2012, p. 66). Though Mihailidis (2008) states that "postsecondary media literacy has suffered from a substantial lack of empirical data" (p. 11), several studies do provide evidence of its marginalized status within the academy. For example, Mihailidis (2006) surveyed 48 journalism and communication programs and found that only 18 included media literacy classes. Similarly, Stuhlman and Silverblatt (2007) surveyed 242 colleges and universities and found that only 158 offered media literacy courses. Furthermore, Schmidt's (2012) survey of 409 college students revealed that media literacy competencies were addressed more often in high school than in college (p. 68). Taken together, these studies support Wulff's (1997) claim that, "the progress towards the incorporation of media literacy as an essential ability in higher education appears minimal" (p. 124). This absence of media literacy in colleges and universities has larger ramifications beyond whether or not media analysis and creation skills are developed. Rather, media literacy in higher education has the potential to "foster a set of abilities necessary for an engaged citizenry" and without it, we lose a valuable opportunity cultivate a stronger democracy and effective agents of change (Schmidt, 2012, p. 71). It is especially important to focus on growing media literacy within higher education because these courses are often the last opportunity for individuals to develop media competencies in a formal educational setting (Mihailidis, 2008; Schmidt, 2012).

Like K–12 education, research offers three potential reasons for "the slow growth of media literacy in higher education" in the United States:

> (1) confusion among faculty regarding what media literacy actually involves, (2) a general perception that students are "digital natives" who do not require media training, or (3) a lingering belief that media courses do not have a place within a liberal arts program of study. (Schmidt, 2012, p. 70)

In other words, divergent approaches to media literacy (Bindig & Castonguay, 2014; Druick, 2016; Hobbs, 1998), false assumptions about students' inherent ability to consciously use and critically analyze media (Buckingham, 2010; Prensky, 2001), and a reluctance to

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include popular culture in the classroom (Schmidt, 2012; Silverblatt, Baker, Tyner, & Stuhlman, 2002) are all factors that impede the growth of media literacy within higher education. However, this list of potential reasons fails to acknowledge larger social forces at play. Thus, this article explores how one prevailing ideology, neoliberalism, has limited the growth of critical media literacy within the contemporary American university.

WHAT IS MEDIA LITERACY?

On the most basic level, media literacy is considered "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms" (Hobbs, 1998). This definition conceptualizes the components of media literacy as an extension of traditional literacy, in which media becomes the "text" and media literacy becomes an individual's ability to interpret existing texts or craft one's own. While this definition of media literacy has been widely adopted, it fails to address ways in which media literacy must go beyond the text. Aufderheide (2001) makes a necessary contribution that expands our understanding of media literacy by offering five key tenets: (1) media are constructions that shape our reality that have (2) commercial interests and (3) ideological and political implications as well as (4) unique forms and content, which (5) viewers negotiate to make meaning. Aufderheide's tenets draw attention to the broader social impact of media. Rather than focusing just on the individual, Aufderheide suggests that media are institutions that have underlying values and those values shape both our individual and collective experiences. As with broad definition of media literacy, Aufderheide's tenets have been embraced the media literacy community. Taken together, these founding principles are intended to operate as guide to help us understand how media function and how media culture impacts our lives. However, these principles still leave much room for interpretation, which results in a media literacy terrain that is contested, rather than universal.

The points of conflict in contemporary media literacy can be traced back to the historical traditions of media studies. Much of the struggle over what media literacy should be revolves around the conception of "media's power and consequent effects, the perceived agency of viewers, and the motivation behind developing the viewers' critical thinking skills" (Bindig & Castonguay, 2014, p. 139). The protectionist approach, associated with concerns over media's "powerful effects," are grounded in the S-R model and the Frankfurt School's notion of "cultural dupes" (Masterman, 2001; Piette & Giroux, 2001). Both approaches "sought to protect vulnerable audiences … from media's corrupting influences" (Bindig & Castonguay, 2014, p. 140). However, unlike the S-R model that focused on individual behaviors, the concerns of the Frankfurt School were rooted in the ideological conformity of the "culture industries" that were driven by capitalism (Yousman, 2016).

A variation of the protectionist approach, the "media as popular arts approach," calls attention to differences between media as well as advocates for "discriminating viewers" (Considine, 2002; Masterman, 2001). Auteur theory is associated with this tradition because it suggests that some media texts are worthy of attention if they are attributed to an "author" (often a director) who is responsible for the text's vision, style, and cinematic techniques (Masterman, 2001). Therefore, while protectionist approaches assumed all media to be the same, the media as popular arts approach posits that some media do have value. In other words, instead of discriminating against media, this approach calls for discrimination within media (Masterman, 2001, p. 22). In practice, the media as popular arts approach tended to privilege the tastes of teachers and high culture over students', ignoring the fact that anyone can actively make meaning through media (Masterman, 2001).

In contrast, the media as representational or symbolic systems approach, grounded in the

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tradition of British Cultural Studies, recognized the value of popular media and viewed it as a site of ideological struggle (Considine, 2002; Masterman, 2001). The potential for agency differentiates British Cultural Studies from previous approaches, as studying the ideological underpinnings of everyday culture was considered a necessary step in the effort to problematize "commonsense" beliefs perpetuated by media and ultimately work toward greater social justice and equality. The focus on agency is also present in American Cultural Studies, which celebrates media technologies and texts by fetishizing individual pleasure and resistance (Bindig & Castonguay, 2014). Not only is the American Cultural Studies approach to media oppositional to the stance of the protectionist approaches but it is also a significant departure from the innately political stance of British Cultural Studies.

While not exhaustive, these historical traditions illustrate that media literacy can be conceptualized and deployed in a variety of ways. However, scholars have proposed that the media literacy movement (those actively promoting media literacy) can essentially be distilled into two opposing camps: the interventionists versus the culturalists (Bindig & Castonguay, 2014). The interventionist framework has been closely linked to the media effects traditions associated with the innoculative approach (Druick, 2016). Interventionists have been characterized as "pessimistic" because they tend to overlook any potential for audience agency and instead focus on the negative consequences of media use. For the majority of interventionists, the purpose of media literacy is to prevent or curtail any damaging effects that come from media exposure. Conversely, the culturalist framework is grounded in the media as representational or symbolic systems approach. Culturalists are deemed "optimistic" because of their emphasis on empowerment and pleasure. Within the culturalist framework, media literacy is viewed as a way to challenge the status quo that is continually reinforced though hegemonic mass media. Despite these distinctions, scholars have identified multiple points of convergence between these two frameworks (Bindig & Castonguay, 2014). However, within each of these two frameworks there are also fundamental differences, which create internal conflict that prevents either camp from moving media literacy forward. If we ever hope to advance media literacy we would be better served by looking beyond these two frameworks and instead turning to a specific model of media literacy that responds to the needs of our cultural moment. Given the current political climate and democracy's demand for media literacy, higher education may be best served by adopting a critical media literacy approach.

WHY CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY?

Critical media literacy is a radical approach to media education that emerged out of British Cultural Studies and incorporates feminism, critical race theory, and Marxism as well as critical pedagogy (Yousman, 2016). These theoretical foundations create a media literacy framework that is ideal for interrogating "the hierarchical power relations that are embedded in all communication and that ultimately benefit dominant social groups at the expense of subordinate ones" (Funk et al., 2016, p. 23). Likewise, these theoretical perspectives are responsible for the intersectional approach adopted by critical media literacy. The adoption of intersectionality helps make plain the intertwined (and overdetermined) inequalities that marginalize large segments of society and ultimately serve to uphold the status quo. Thus, rather than focusing solely on individual oppression and agency, critical media literacy addresses structural forces. As Yousman (2016) explains:

> One essential way that critical media education differs from other forms of media literacy is in its willingness to go behind the messages and shine a light on the powerful institutions that control the media environment, as well as their practices of employing

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> engaging visual imagery and storytelling to advance their own economic and ideological agendas. (p. 377)

In other words, unlike other media literacy approaches, critical media literacy is willing to openly confront how the profit-driven mass media is more concerned with promoting capitalism's agenda than the public's best interest. Therefore, critical media literacy can be construed as a holistic approach to media education:

> One that encompasses both textual and contextual concerns within a critical framework, 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. (Yousman, 2016, pp. 385–386)

Critical pedagogy also serves to distinguish critical media literacy from other forms of media education. Based in Freirian empowerment theory, critical pedagogy envisions education as "the development of a critical consciousness, as students are able to gain an understanding of and control over the personal, social, economic, and political forces affecting them" (Gonzales, Glik, Davoudi, + Ang, 2004, p.193). To be clear, critical pedagogy and critical media literacy are not the same. Critical pedagogy can be applied to any educational discipline. However, critical media literacy requires critical pedagogy in order to meet its emancipatory goals. Through critical pedagogy, critical media literacy eschews the banking model of education, which focuses on passivity and conformity, and instead stresses engaged colearning through reflexivity and praxis. Thus, critical pedagogy's influence is apparent in critical media literacy curricula that not only teach students how to analyze media but also how to challenge media through activism. With critical pedagogy, critical media literacy becomes 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" (Funk, Kellner, & Share, 2016, p. 2). Put another way, with the help of critical pedagogy, critical media literacy functions as a consciousness-raising tool that highlights the interplay between social structures and individual lives and creates well-informed citizens by fostering critical thinking about media industries, production techniques, texts, and audiences as well as engaging in media activism.

Despite its transformative potential, critical media literacy has faced resistance from the broader media literacy community. Some educators conflate the explicit political agenda of critical media literacy with "indoctrination" (Yousman, 2016). However, Lewis and Jhally (1998) explain that critical media literacy does not promote a specific political agenda; rather, it "recognizes that the world is always made by someone, and a decision to tolerate the status quo is as political as a more overtly radical act" (p. 119). Others contend that media education must be "neutral," "unbiased," or "objective," while critical media literacy scholars acknowledge "all pedagogical practices are rooted in politics" (Sholle, 1994, p. 15). Furthermore, there are those within the movement that feel that critical media literacy engages in "media bashing." However, critical media literacy does not deny the enjoyment that can come from media, but rather asks students to thoughtfully reflect upon that pleasure and contextualize it within a broader structural framework. Likewise, critical media literacy has also been accused of being disinterested in media production and dismissive of student generated media. In reality, critical media literacy acknowledges both the pedagogical oppor-

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tunities (a deeper understanding of media techniques and the potential feelings of empowerment) and pitfalls (emulation of mainstream media rather than analytical analysis) that come with media production. Despite these criticisms, a significant impediment to critical media literacy being fully integrated into higher education comes from an outside force: neoliberalism.

WHAT IS NEOLIBERALISM AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The roots of neoliberalism are grounded in 18th century liberal political theory and political economy, which emphasize the relationship between individuals and market transactions (Hall, Massey, & Rustin, 2015). Over time capitalism's industrialization and globalization have furthered neoliberal ideologies as they idealize the notion of the "free market" while obfuscating the commodification and exploitation of labor. Within the past 30 years, the tenets of neoliberalism have coalesced into a taken-for-granted belief that "revolves around the supposed naturalness of 'the market,' the primacy of the competitive individual, the superiority of the private over the public" and "has produced a regime of power, profit, and privilege" (Hall et al., 2015, p. 14). As a result, neoliberalism has widened inequalities, circumvented democracy and citizenship, and aimed to fragment opposition and silence dissenting voices (Hall et al., 2015, p. 20).

As Yousman (2016) astutely notes, "tragically, in the era of imperial neoliberalism the success of the few is being paid for by the misery of the many. As a global society, we are facing enormous challenges of capitalism run wild" (p. 389). Yousman's words suggest that far from being invisible, neoliberal ideology has left discernable marks on the people and institutions it has held in its grip. Furthermore, "once neoliberal goals and priorities become embedded in a culture's way of thinking, institutions that don't regard themselves as neoliberal will nevertheless engage in practices that mime and extend neoliberal principles…" (Fish, 2009, pp. 3–4). Thus, like a bruise, the true magnitude of neoliberal ideology reveals itself over time—it goes beyond its initial point of impact and darkens the areas that surround it. Thus, neoliberalism presents us with a stark reality:

> the selling off of public goods to private interests; the attack on social provisions, the rise of the corporate state organized around privatization, free trade and deregulation; the celebration of self-interests over social needs; the claim that government is the problem if it gets in the way of profits for the mega-corporations and financial services; the investing in prisons rather than schools; the modeling of education after the culture of business; the insistence that exchange values are the only values worthy of consideration; the celebration of profit-making as the essence of democracy coupled with the utterly reductionist notion that consumption is the only applicable form of citizenship. But even more than that, neoliberal ideology upholds the notion that the market serves as a model for structuring all social relations: not just the economy, but the governing of all social life. (Giroux, 2015, p. 46)

In other words, neoliberalism is not simply an economic policy that is only of interest to wall street fat cats and power-hungry politicians. Rather, neoliberalism is at the core of how contemporary society functions and impacts everyday life.

HOW DOES NEOLIBERALISM IMPACT HIGHER EDUCATION?

As Giroux (2015) notes above, education is just one of neoliberalism's many victims. As an extension of the broader neoliberal influence on social institutions, higher education has experienced a shift in its funding sources (Saunders, 2010). While the lack of governmental support for public institutions is most visible, private nonprofit colleges and univer-

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sities are also adversely affected by decreased funding and financial aid. Like a caricature of Disney's greedy Scrooge McDuck with dollar signs in his eyes, these changes in educational funding have resulted in the increased focus of university administrators and trustees on methods for generating profits and revenue streams at the cost of the true meaning of education.

The true purpose of higher education is best encapsulated by Giroux (2013), who posits, "the university is nothing if it is not a public trust and social good; that is a critical institution infused with the promise of cultivating intellectual insight, the imagination, inquisitiveness, risk-taking, social responsibility and the struggle for justice" (p. 2). However, Saunders (2010) is quick to point out that while the American model of higher education has long been associated with "civic engagement, democratic education, and learning for its own sake," these values have been eroding since "the expansion of public education in the nineteenth century" (pp. 54–55). Therefore, all the ills of higher education cannot be solely attributed to the rise of neoliberalism. Nevertheless, "what is new to the neoliberal university is the scope and extent of these profit-driven, corporate ends, as well as how many students, faculty, administrators, and policy makers explicitly support and embrace these capitalistic goals and priorities" (Saunders, 2010, p. 55). This means that today higher education employs a range of practices that reflect neoliberal values including: the privatization of funding and prioritization of profits; the corporatization of university infrastructure and decision-making; the destabilization of faculty positions and promotion of entrepreneurship; and a significant shift in student motivations and identities (Fish, 2009; Giroux, 2013; Saunders, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000).

While the upper echelons of university administration pursue alternative sources of funding, such as courting private donors and corporate partners with a quixotic zeal, they also impose numerous decisions that disempower faculty and students and drain education of its transformative potential. In regards to faculty, neoliberalism's privileging of profit has resulted in a move away from the tenure system and toward limited term contracts as well as an overwhelming reliance on part-time instructors and graduate students. The increased dependence on contingent labor diminishes the power of faculty since they are unable to participate in university governance and lack the protection of tenure. Even when faculty have job security, neoliberal values advance academic fields that are aligned with corporate interests. This marginalizes faculty in the liberal arts and education by transforming the university curriculum into one dedicated to developing the vocational skills that are needed to advanced corporate capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000). Likewise, faculty are encouraged to pursue research agendas that are commercially viable and develop teaching materials that can be sold for profit (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000).

When students, the very population higher education is supposed to serve, are actually factored in to the equation, it becomes clear that the neoliberal university is no longer concerned with developing thoughtful, critical and engaged citizens. Rather, as Slaughter and Rhoades (2000) note, the neoliberal university's role is "in training advanced students for professional positions … preparing students to be malleable workers who will fit into [corporate] workplaces." Because of the emphasis on credentialing and job preparation, higher education is seen as a means to an end. The emphasis on the "market value" of education rather than its intrinsic value dovetails with the hailing of students not as learners but as customers, which further entrenches them in neoliberalism. Through these practices it is undoubtedly true that "the neoliberal university strengthens and extends some of the nefarious purposes of our colleges and universities while simultaneously limiting their ability to realize their critical and emancipatory potential" (Saunders, 2010, p. 66). As a result, the neoliberal university creates an inhospitable, and at times even hostile, environment for critical media literacy to grow and thrive.

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CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY VS NEOLIBERALISM: THE BATTLE FOR SPACE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

If we think of neoliberalism as an ideological octopus, it's clear that it has wrapped its powerful tentacles around the university resulting in the hollowing (rather than hallowing) of education. Given this context, it is not surprising that critical media literacy has been at best marginalized or at worst absent from higher education in the age of neoliberalism. As Yousman (2016) explains:

> critical pedagogy and critical media literacy should be understood as the natural enemies of neoliberalism. Critical pedagogy encourages independent thinking and action. Neoliberalism encourages conformity and passivity in the face of authority. Critical pedagogy advocates for fully participatory democracy. Neoliberalism hides behind a façade of democracy while promulgating totalitarian tendencies. Critical pedagogy is about building community and nurturing communal values. Neoliberalism celebrates hyperindividualism and glorifies self-interest. Critical pedagogy is based in an ethical commitment to justice for all. Neoliberalism is devoted to greed and rapacious accumulation whatever the cost. (p. 390)

Though it is formidable adversary, critical media literacy must identify and overcome the obstacles set out by neoliberalism if it is ever to gain a foothold within the university. More specifically, scholars must develop strategies to address large and small-scale vocationalism, the culture of assessment, and depoliticized research agendas that impinge the growth of critical media literacy in higher education.

As already mentioned, the neoliberal university unabashedly promotes vocationalism, which conflicts with critical media literacy because it "eschews matters of inequality, power and the ethical grammars of suffering" in favor of professional skills that further corporate interests (Giroux, 2013, p. 3). However, neoliberal vocationalism threatens the growth of critical media literacy within the academy on two different levels. On the macrolevel, "many disciplines are now valued almost exclusively with how they align with what might be euphemistically called a business culture" (Giroux, 2013, p. 5). Therefore, vocationalism impacts the amount of institutional support each discipline, department, and program receives, with the those that embrace corporate values being far more likely to receive limited resources such as increasingly elusive full-time tenure-track faculty lines, support staff, and protection from ever-shrinking operational budgets. Likewise, these are the departments with greater chances for developing new programs, especially if they are designed with "professionals" in mind (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000). Because the underlying ethos of critical media literacy is at odds with the inherent capitalist ideology of corporate vocationalism, it is unlikely that departments that foster critical media literacy (like communication and education) will garner much institutional support. Furthermore, it is important to remember that university administrators and bean counters, who benefit from neoliberalism's corporatization of education, are not likely to welcome critical media literacy curricula that challenge capitalism and question the status quo.

Critical media literacy also struggles to take hold within the neoliberal university because there is no clear connection to a specific profession. In contrast to fields like accounting or marketing, in which majors learn defined skillsets for specific occupations, students studying critical media literacy are able to apply their knowledge in an array of contexts. In a neoliberal world where the sole purpose of education has become corporate career preparation, critical media literacy's broad application becomes a liability instead of an asset. Unlike disciplines with explicit professional pathways, critical media literacy is not compatible with vocational rhetoric, such as "job markets" and "placement rates," that colleges and universities are so fond of spouting in promotional

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materials. To be fair, there are disciplines, like education, that offer a clear professional pathway and adopt a critical media literacy approach. However, these programs tend to be underfunded and undervalued by the neoliberal university because they fail to serve corporate interests.

On the microlevel, neoliberal vocationalism influences what types of courses are included in the university curriculum. Departments are increasingly encouraged to offer career-oriented technical courses and academic credit for internships at the expense of critical courses or courses focused on participatory action and engagement. When looking to integrate "real world" experience into courses, faculty are encouraged to forge relationships with industry partners rather than community partners. Likewise, university administrators are more likely to extend invitations, provide honorariums, and fund travel for corporate guest speakers than for those than do critical scholarship or activist work.

When critical media literacy courses are found in a neoliberal university setting, corporate vocationalism works to undermine it. Druick (2016) suggests that there have been multiple attempts to "neutralize" or coopt media literacy curricula. For instance, corporations now offer free media literacy materials that are nothing more than branded advertisements geared toward a captive audience of students. Likewise, huge media tech companies like Apple and Google regularly reach out to faculty to conduct complimentary "workshops." Masquerading as professional development, these workshops are more akin to trade show demonstrations, where tech representatives show educators how to integrate their products in the classroom in hopes of increasing hardware and software sales. Druick (2016) explains that "media companies have aggressively sought out the classroom" because it allows them to simultaneously target students as consumers and as future employees (p. 1135).

Even if critical media literacy courses elude media corporations, a vocational ethos can still adversely affect the curriculum. For instance, when departments are told by administrators or accrediting bodies to make room for more "practical" or technical courses, the number of critical offerings in a program of study are diminished. Likewise, when faculty are told to increase the amount of "practical" skills and information in their individual courses, the amount of critical content decreases. Well-intentioned faculty may try to counter these demands by integrating the practical with the critical through redesigned courses that "do it all." These types of classes are problematic because they adopt "discourses that tend to emphasize neutral methodology and downplay politics, evoking democracy while simultaneously smoothing out the conflicts and contradictions" (Druick, 2016, p. 1128). As a result, this approach actually undermines critical media literacy rather than advancing it.

One related and equally vexing phenomenon that is unique to communication and media programs in higher education is the tendency to consider all of their courses "media literacy." Though every course in the major may address one or more of the tenets of media literacy in general, unless it adopts the radical framework discussed earlier in this article, the department would not be furthering critical media literacy within the university. Even the most well-meaning departments can fall victim to lumping all media literacy together. However, when this happens the concept becomes so diffuse that critical media literacy starts to lose its meaning.

Neoliberal vocationalism that is linked to academic silos also curtails an interdisciplinary approach to critical media literacy. While Schmidt (2013) suggests that media literacy may be able to grow through interdisciplinary efforts, emphasis on specialized career training pushes students to pursue coursework that directly relates to their major and rarely venture outside their own corner of the university. Therefore, interdisciplinary critical media literacy courses are often deemed "tangential" or not noticed at all by students with career-driven tunnel vision. Even when interdisciplin-

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ary critical media literacy courses are cross-listed among several academic programs they are still only "housed" in one department. Consequently, when a critical media literacy course is cross-listed, the class is primarily comprised of students from the "home" discipline. That said, team teaching is a viable strategy for diversifying the students who enroll in an interdisciplinary course as well as a strategy for fostering critical media literacy throughout the academy. Unfortunately, questions surrounding faculty compensation and faculty load requirements are impediments to team teaching interdisciplinary critical media literacy courses. Overall, the institutional silos maintained through the neoliberal university help constrain the growth of critical media literacy and undercut the multi-dimensionality of the work.

Related to vocationalism, the neoliberal culture of assessment also acts as a barrier to critical media literacy gaining traction within the academy. As Giroux (2013) notes, the neoliberal university promotes "audit culture," where learning is measured in "discrete and quantifiable units." Audit culture is antithetical to critical media literacy because it imagines student growth as the long-term development of complex thinking, which cannot be easily broken down and assessed. Because it is cultivated over time, critical media literacy does not adhere to traditional assessment measures or fit neatly into institutional assessment calendars. Rather than questioning the quantification of education, the neoliberal university is more likely to question the value of critical media literacy courses that fail to conform to its standard practices. Therefore, critical media literacy courses risk being characterized as "underperforming" when compared to the assessment of its technical counterparts.

Additionally, neoliberal ideologies have stymied the growth of critical media literacy in higher education by reshaping research agendas. Critical scholars have decried that academic research no longer has any connection to the public interest (Fish, 2009; Giroux, 2013). Devaluing public intellectualism in favor of industry-oriented research agendas has become a significant obstacle for critical media literacy scholarship, which questions capitalist institutional forces and their adverse impact on everyday life. The neoliberal university's disregard for public intellectualism also has a significant impact on the agency and security of critical media literacy scholars. The precariousness of faculty positions, particularly for those without tenure, makes it difficult to conduct research that addresses salient political issues and challenges status quo. Even when faculty engage in critical media literacy research, promotion and tenure committees (along with institutional committees that dole out grant funding) may look down on research that is grounded in media and popular culture or that could be classified as "too political." Similarly, critical media literacy research that relies on community engagement can be dismissed or misconstrued as service because the theoretical rigor and tremendous amount of labor it entails are not necessarily evident to evaluators. Thus, the neoliberal university, and even well-meaning colleagues, will often encourage critical media literacy scholars to pursue "safer" research agendas to mitigate risk and avoid negative consequences that come from challenging the status quo.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

If critical media literacy hopes to overcome the barriers put forward by neoliberalism and fully integrate itself into higher education, it must embrace intellectual judo. A practice long adopted by critical scholars, intellectual judo recognizes the ideas, arguments, and values of adversaries in order to use their "logic" against them and advance progressive goals. In this case, "we must be aware of and critically engage with the institutions, practices, behaviors, and beliefs that together create and promulgate neoliberalism" (Saunders, 2010, p. 66). Thus, intellectual judo provides a means for challenging neoliberal ideologies that have constrained the growth of critical

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media literacy within American colleges and universities.

Neoliberalism's impact on university funding presents a vulnerability that can be exploited through intellectual judo. Ang (2006) explains, "as universities are facing diminishing public funding and are forced to become more 'entrepreneurial,' many of them are simultaneously redefining themselves as 'porous' public institutions with decidedly outward-looking missions—as is evident in the rise of the language of 'community engagement'" (p. 191). In an effort to grow critical media literacy within the neoliberal university, it may be useful to highlight the way critical media literacy activism supports the mission or strategic plan of the institution. While the neoliberal university's focus on "community engagement" should not be construed as anything more than empty rhetoric, critical media literacy genuinely embraces democratic citizenship and social engagement. Utilizing this approach, critical media literacy may be able to simultaneously achieve two goals at once: first, by creating space in higher education for critical media literacy through community engagement opportunities and second, by using community engagement as an opportunity to engage in social justice initiatives.

The neoliberal university's preoccupation with profit through new revenue streams offers another opportunity for critical media literacy to practice intellectual judo. The mainstream media's coverage of fake news may be the first time that university administrators are introduced to the concept, though critical media literacy has a history that long pre-dates the current political regime. Ironically, in this context the mainstream media becomes an unlikely ally for the growth of critical media literacy as it presents media education as a new "cutting edge" discipline. In turn, this provides a compelling rationale for opening a "new space" for critical media literacy within higher education to university administrators.

Intellectual judo also enables critical media literacy to combat large and small-scale vocationalism by reframing its versatility. Since critical media literacy hones critical thinking and prepares students for democratic life, it can certainly be presented as a worthwhile core requirement that is applicable to any program of study. Surely critical media literacy courses may face some resistance from students, faculty, and administrators that have been indoctrinated by capitalism. However, if these individuals truly embrace the neoliberal ideology of "workplace preparation," they may be swayed by the argument that critical media literacy can be applied in a variety of settings, which ultimately makes students "more marketable." While appealing to market logic may make some scholars queasy, reaching more students, particularly those who are unfamiliar with critical work, helps further the ultimate goals of critical media literacy by challenging their taken-for-granted beliefs about the way the world works and introducing them to alternative perspectives. Though anecdotal, I have seen graduate students pursuing careers in public relations begin to question their chosen profession (as well as their own personal values) when introduced to a critical media literacy approach.

Highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of critical media literacy may also help combat the academic silos that prevent a range of students from being exposed to this perspective. In this case, intellectual judo may be helpful in finding connections to critical media literacy across the university curriculum, making it possible to breakdown institutional barriers and develop interdisciplinary programs and courses. Not only would these courses and programs foster critical media literacy in more students, it would also broaden the range of perspectives in the classroom and allow for deeper understanding. For faculty, stressing the interdisciplinary nature of critical media literacy helps build alliances across the university. These alliances may result in collaborative research initiatives that promote critical media literacy within and outside of higher education.

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Finally, intellectual judo can help undo the myth of "objective" education by exposing the hidden curriculum and its links to capitalism (Saunders, 2010, p.61). Intellectual judo can make clear that all curricula have underlying values and as such education cannot be neutral. Thus, uncovering the hidden curriculum creates a space for critical media literacy to flourish within higher education without criticisms that it is "too political." Rather, if intellectual judo reveals that all education has political implications, then it also provides an opportunity for faculty to reflect on their educational philosophies and pedagogical approaches. Though this type of self-reflection is often derided as navel-gazing, if critical media literacy is to grow within the academy, faculty must not shy away from practices that challenge the status quo. As Yousman (2016) explains:

> Critical media literacy based in a philosophy of critical pedagogy seeks to challenge these patterns while encouraging critical awareness, critical investigation, and critical action around issues of media, culture and power. Is that a political act? You bet it is. And survival under the present conditions of neoliberal capitalism necessitates just this sort of politically engaged pedagogy. (p. 387)

CONCLUSION

Although I outline several strategies for using intellectual judo to grow critical media literacy within the neoliberal university, it would be naïve to think this is an easy feat. Overworked and undercompensated faculty committed to challenging the status quo of the neoliberal university are required to rearrange their priorities in order to present carefully crafted arguments to the administration. To achieve institutional change, intellectual judo must be employed repeatedly, with deliberate tactical modifications to effectively dismantle the neoliberal tactics that keep critical media literacy from taking hold within the academy. Confronting power is never easy—it takes time, energy, and resilience that drain even the most passionate critical media scholar. Therefore, it is essential that we take time to remind ourselves what we are fighting for—we must remember the rewards of critical media literacy.

While I do not intend to imply that my experiences are universal, below I offer a few salient examples of the potential rewards of critical media literacy. My teaching and research have been enriched by collaboration with university colleagues on interdisciplinary critical media literacy projects. Likewise, I have received an immeasurable amount of support and encouragement by connecting with fellow like-minded professionals through critical media literacy organizations.

As someone who has helped bring a graduate degree in a critical media literacy to fruition, I have found the creation of new courses and curricula incredibly worthwhile as I both teach and learn from my students. Observing my students as they discover the literature, explore research questions, make their first conference presentations, and enter the next stage in their careers as doctoral students, K–12 teachers, and social justice advocates in non-profit organizations is nothing short of uplifting. Most of all, whenever I feel discouraged I only need to think of a future with widespread critical media literacy—one that focuses on "equality, democracy, community and citizenship rather than material accumulation, hyperindividualism, and consumerism" to find myself reinvigorated (Yousman, 2016, p. 408).

The American university's investment in critical media literacy is now more important than ever. As the political climate moves to embrace authoritarianism as well as neoliberalism, scholars must be committed to finding a place for critical media literacy within higher education in hopes that it can provide students the tools for active and engaged citizenship. After all:

> Higher education represents one of the most important sites over which the battle for democracy is being waged. It is the site

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> where the promise of a better future emerges out of those visions and pedagogical practices that combine hope, agency, politics and moral responsibility as part of a broader emancipatory discourse. Academics have a distinct and unique obligation, if not political and ethical responsibility, to make learning relevant to the imperatives of a discipline, scholarly method, or research specialization. But more importantly, academics as engaged scholars can further the activation of knowledge, passion, values and hope in the service of forms of agency that are crucial to sustaining a democracy in which higher education plays an important civic, critical and pedagogical role. (Giroux, 2013, p. 12)

Though intellectually we know this is no easy task, being optimistic about the ability to strategically confront the challenges that lie ahead may ultimately help us reap the rewards of critical media literacy. To do this, educators must recognize and confront the practices of the neoliberal university, in order to foster widespread critical media literacy and work towards a more just society.

NOTE

1. It should be noted that this figure does not include time spent using media for educational purposes.

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