SPECIAL ISSUE
Digital Social Work:
Challenges, Trends and Best Practices

Bridging the Gaps: Literacy, Media Literacy Education, and Critical Digital Social Work

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Drawing from literacy studies and research in media literacy education, this article contends that a series of conceptual gaps need to be bridged in order to have a better understanding of how these traditions can contribute to redefining the field of digital social work. The field of digital social work should move towards a more critical-oriented dimension so that digital media and the internet should not simply be considered (as it is often the case), as mere tools to improve the professionality of social workers, but rather as life environments and systems of representation shaping individuals' identities and social relationships.

Keywords: Literacy, media literacy education, digital media, critical digital social work.

For at least two centuries, modern society has seen a gradual development in literacy, both in terms of quantity (as an increasing and varied number of people have been able to have access to it) and quality (as the areas of knowledge and action, as well as the actors and contexts involved, have widened and diversified). A further development is linked to the so-called "digital turn" by which new literacies have emerged in online digital environments affecting a variety of social contexts, such as workplace and training, economics and leisure, education and social work. Drawing from these developments, this article contends that a series of conceptual gaps need to be bridged in order to have a better understanding of how this "bridging" contributes to redefining the field of digital social work towards a more critically-oriented dimension.

"Situated" Literacies

From the second half of the past century, the debate about the concept of literacy has developed around two major schools of thought that schematically define literacy either as a "set of cognitive skills" or a "situated social practice" (Street, 2003). In the first instance, literacy develops a set of psycholinguistic skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) that produce significant consequences both at individual and social level. According to this model, the invention of writing leads to more sophisticated forms of thought and, more importantly, aids the general development of society (Goody & Watt, 1963; Havelock, 1986; Ong, 1982). In this view, the transition from oral culture to written culture, from pre-literate to post-literate civilization, marks what has been called the "great divide" (Scribner & Cole, 1981), i.e., the gap between societies and cultures that develop certain cognitive skills of "higher order" and those who still do not enjoy this privilege. This model of literacy, long adopted in schools as well as in the development programs such as UNESCO's, lies on the assumption that the acquisition of literacy brings *per se* to the cognitive, social, economic and cultural growth of disadvantaged, illiterate persons, be they living in the Third World, in the poorest rural regions, or in the slums of big metropolitan areas. Building on a functionalist vision of society, it assumes that individuals, entering the institutional settings where literacy is imparted, acquire cognitive skills as well as an entire set of values, norms and behaviors that favor inclusion, development, and social mobility. As a result of this view, school has come to be established as the formal educational institution *par excellence*, where cognitive and operational skills are gained through the achievement of a series of formalized, measurable, standardized, transferable, and therefore "universal" learning objectives, fulfilling individual and social expectations of promotion and mobility (Paci, 1973).

In the late '70s, however, this model was questioned and a new notion of literacy as a "socially situated practice" arose. The increase in school enrollment rates and the expansion of qualifications produced an inflation of education credentials and a fall of the social mobility expectations they had supported until then (Collins, 1979). The concept of literacy as a "set of cognitive skills" underlying this

model proves ideologically oriented and not equipped to deal with the diversity and complexity of a society rapidly changing, both socially and culturally. Graff (1979), for example, criticizes this concept defining it as a *myth*, i.e., an ideological construct on which Western society had historically based its supremacy, making it invariably stand for progress and social advancement, while the opposite—illiteracy—was standing for ignorance and underdevelopment. Equating education and school is no longer functional to the development of society and the need for "de-schooling society" (Illich, 1971) and a new "educational polycentrism" (Cesareo, 1974) emerge. Scholars from the New Literacies Studies argue that, far from being an independent and neutral variable, literacy is in fact embedded in the specific contextual conditions under which it is defined, institutionalized, and practiced (Gee, 2004, 2010; Hamilton, 2012; Street, 2003; Kress, 2003). Drawing from an ecological perspective, literacy is seen as the dynamic result of the relationship between the individual, the family, the group, the local community, and—inevitably—digital media and online environments (Cappello, 2017).

Bridging the Gap to a "Digitally Literate Society"

Back in 1993, Eco quite bluntly remarked that "if you want to use television to teach somebody, you must first teach them how to use television" (p. 96). In other words, the educational use of television is not simply that of teaching *with* television, considering it as a neutral means of delivering information to be used in a merely functional or instrumental way. Teaching *about* television—that is, how and why it creates meaning in particular ways while representing reality—is also equally important. Unfortunately, Eco's recommendation has not gone too far. So, if today one asks a teacher what "becoming a digitally literate student" means, in most cases s/he would probably start talking about being able to access online information on a specific topic in one discipline, to use a technological tool (an app or software) to do homework (write an essay, do math exercises, make a drawing), video-document the theatre drama performed at the end of the school year, do the *e-tivities* assigned by the teacher in the digital classroom opened in some e-learning platform, and so on. As matter of fact, a massive number

of studies have been developed to theorize and verify empirically if and how teaching with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) actually innovate and enhance learning and didactics (Gui, 2019; Ranieri, 2011; Rivoltella & Rossi 2019; Selwyn, 2011, 2016).

However, there is another possible answer to that question, one that few teachers are prepared to give, given that very little money has been devoted to train teachers in the field of critical digital literacy education out of the huge economic investments (both public and private) made for the development of school technological infrastructure and teachers' training in the use of the *tools.* Following Eco's suggestion, such an answer doesn't look at information and communication technologies (ICTs) only as tools or teaching aids, but also as *life environments* where social acts occur, as *systems of representation* shaping individuals' identities and social relationships, as *consumer goods* within an ever-growing market, and as *cultural objects* resulting from a complex interaction between creators, recipients and the social world (Griswold, 1994).

So, it is not only a question of teaching *with* ICTs but also teaching *about* them. It is within this perspective that in his *Onlife Manifesto* Floridi (2015) refers to "becoming a digitally literate society" as a priority for a "good on life governance" (p. 7). *Onlife* is the term he coins to define the contemporary condition where "the deployment of ICTs and their uptake by society affects radically the human condition, insofar as it modifies our relationships to ourselves, to others and to the world around us," increasingly shifting the "primacy from entities to connections" and blurring the boundaries between real and virtual as well as human, machine, and nature (p. 7). In this sense, ICTs are not mere tools for whatever activities we are engaged with (either for leisure, work or learning), they are also the environments where such activities take place and are made possible. As such, they have a major impact not only on how people (per)form their identity, make sense of reality, experience sociality and creative expression, but also at cultural, ethical, legal, and political levels, not to mention the economy and the market. Given this impact, Floridi (2015) calls for policies that are built, upon a critical investigation of how human affairs and political structures are deeply mediated by technologies. Endorsing responsibility in a hyperconnected reality requires acknowledging how our actions,

perceptions, intentions, morality, even corporality are interwoven with technologies in general, and ICTs in particular (p. 12).

Undoubtedly, ICTs have increased people's access to information and offered sophisticated systems of data retrieval, storage, and circulation. They have also de-materialized spatial-temporal boundaries creating new forms of relationships, expression, and communication characterized—especially with the advent of social media platforms—by a horizontal "disintermediated" logic whereby traditional intermediaries have lost power in favor of more direct interactions. As Chadwick (2007) puts it, disintermediation means "removing intermediaries from a supply chain, a transaction, or, more broadly, any set of social, economic, or political relations" (p. 232). Social media platforms have amplified the possibility to create and be part of a "participatory culture," as Jenkins et al. define it (2009), that is, a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). (p. 3)

Within this culture, some "new media literacies" develop that are inherently *digital* and *social,* as they always imply some kind of interaction within larger communities based online and centered around different media, producing content in diverse creative forms, working collaboratively on a variety of projects (often related with entertainment and popular culture), sharing and circulating contents (either self-made or not) across a whole range of social networks and websites. In particular, Jenkins et al. (2009) identify 13 new media literacies:

> *Play*: the capacity to experiment with one's surroundings as a form of problem solving. *Performance*: the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery. *Simulation*: the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes. *Appropriation*: the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content. *Multitasking:* the ability to scan one's environment and shift focus as needed to salient details. *Distributed Cognition*: the ability to interact meaningfully

with tools that expand mental capacities. *Collective Intelligence*: the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal. *Judgment*: the ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources. *Transmedia Navigation*: the ability to follow the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities. *Networking*: the ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information. *Negotiation:* the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms. *Visualization*: the ability to translate information into visual models and understand the information visual models are communicating as a key method for coping with large data sets and being able to make sense of the complexity of our environment. (p. 4)

These transformations, however, have also produced a series of "unintended, perverse effects" (Boudon, 1982). For example, the new online forms of sociality, expression, and communication have led to problems such as cyberbullying, hate speech, voyeurism and narcissism, the *hikikomori* generation (Caresta, 2018), lack of privacy, etc. Increasingly, social network platforms generate highly emotive and polarized positions, as Davies (2019) points out, as well as fake news that often respond to the interests of organized groups, as has been highlighted, for example, in the case of misinformation and generic drugs (del Fresno García & López Peláez, 2014). Furthermore, research done around literacy and social work has found evidence of what is called relational illiteracy, defined as "the absence of basic relational skills that allow adequate social interaction, positive integration with the environment, and help confront and solve problems and opportunities" (López Peláez & Gómez Ciriano, 2020, p. 321). This social phenomenon, relational illiteracy, occurs both online and offline. In the confinement caused by COVID-19, the loss of basic relational skills has become a global problem. The increased access to information has exacerbated inequality and social stratification (the so-called digital divide); more importantly, it has brought an information overload whereby people, being less and less capable of metabolizing and verifying information reliability, tend to depend on some kind of digital expert systems (i.e., Artificial Intelligence) which filter information according to personalized profiles created by sophisticated data analytics. Ultimately,

disintermediation is being replaced by old-fashioned *intermediation*, as De Rosa (2000) argues, although they have the chance to do basically anything on the Internet (…), people, overwhelmed by information, will tend to delegate their "power" to others: to browsers increasingly powerful which will select information according to criteria not always clear and transparent, and to brokers (be they human or artificial intelligence) who will process and edit it in an increasingly pleasurable way. (p. 193)

These "perverse effects" require the development of a more critical attitude towards digital media experiences and how they shape people's perceptions of the world, hence leading to more ethically responsible behaviors in online interactions. In sum, becoming literate today means: (a) to be able to use ICTs to access and share content to meet individual and community needs and interests; (b) to make informed choices among a wide range of media forms and content from different sources; (c) to understand how and why media content is produced, both individually and institutionally; (d) to use media creatively as a means of expression and communication; (e) to identify and avoid (or challenge) media content and services that may be unsolicited, offensive, or harmful; and (f) to make effective use of media in the exercise of democratic rights and civic responsibilities (EuroMediaLiteracy, 2009; see also European Commission, 2007). Access to technological devices or platforms is an important precondition (which is far from being universally reached, as data about the digital divide persistently show), and yet it is not sufficient. A shift is needed from *technical/formal access* to a more substantial *qualified access*, i.e., access endowed with the critical, creative, and cultural competence required to participate and intervene in the contemporary digital public sphere (Cappello, 2009, 2012). Qualified access defines citizenship today and, as such, it should be regarded as a universal public good; any limitation to it is a limitation to democracy and to a fundamental entitlement due to all citizens. As Rodotà (1997) convincingly remarks, "If the new media were only consumption goods, growing inequalities could be in a way accepted. Being instead indispensable tools for cultural, social, political and economic participation, the new inequalities are quite risky for democracy" (pp. 91–92).

Bridging the Gap to Critical Digital Social Work

If literacy is better defined as a *situated social practice* that is being developed not only in formal educational contexts but also in informal and non-formal socializing/educational agencies, such as the family, the local community, the peer group, and the living worlds of the internet, digital social work has a major role to play in making contemporary society *digitally literate*. ICTs develop a whole range of informal learning processes in which participants are simultaneously "instructors" and "learners". As Jenkins' (2009) notion of "participatory culture" reminds us, these processes have a unique heuristic nature as they function through trial and error, exploration, experimentation, and play, as well as through collaboration and reciprocal peer-mentoring, both offline and online. Undeniably, social work scholars and practitioners have increasingly addressed the issue of using ICTs in human service activities (Chan, 2016, 2018; Christon Adedoyin, 2016; Kirwan, 2019; López Peláez & Marcuello-Servós, 2018a, 2018b). In most cases, findings show that using ICTs produces a positive impact on social work activities and, at the same time, raises concerns in regards to privacy issues, since the boundaries between professional and personal profiles tend to blur, and also in regards to the assessment and evaluation of the actual impact of this kind of interventions. In a 2018 issue of the *European Journal of Social Work* dedicated to introducing "e-Social Work," López Peláez & Marcuello-Servós (2018a) define it as a field including "online research, patient treatment (individual therapy, group and community dynamics), the training and teaching of social workers and the monitoring of social service programs" (p. 801). For example, social workers may use ICTs to: (a) reach out and connect with clients living a condition of marginalization, isolation, or social deprivation; (b) to mobilize offline community cohesion and action in local initiatives; and (c) to explore with clients' new ways of expression and communication as well as new forms of social networking. However, just as I argued at the beginning of the previous paragraph, ICTs are not mere tools to be *used*. Social workers need to develop a critical stance also based on the scientific dimension of social work, as highlighted by Brekke & Anastas (2019). As it applies to the digital world, such critical stance—a kind of critical digital social work—will allow them to gain a deeper understanding of

how ICTs shape the *onlife* of their clients; how ICTs may become the environments where digital citizenship rights can be denied, mistreated, and at the same time exercised; and how certain worrisome online practices can be addressed and solved.

An example may come from the critical digital social work that can be done with issues of digital addiction and young people. Findings from a massive number of studies prove that a relationship exists between prolonged use of digital media and young people's social, physical, and psychological wellbeing (for a synthetic review of these studies, see Ranieri 2020). Twenge et al. (2018), for example, found that the recent rise in U.S. adolescents' depressive symptoms and suicide rates is linked to the rise in the time spent using social media and electronic devices such as smartphones. However, their findings, as in most similar studies, do not actually provide empirical evidence of a *causal* relationship between depression and the prolonged use of electronic screens. As they admit, "identifying the mechanisms underlying trends in mental health is necessarily difficult as experimental trials are not possible. (…) Thus, we must turn to correlational research to provide evidence" (Twenge et al., 2018, p. 5). As a consequence, we can only speculate about associations between concurring phenomena rather than make actual determinations.

Another example may come from research done about young people's relationship with videogaming. Apart from pathological addictive situations where more clinical interventions are required, critical digital social work could help them develop a kind of "videogame literacy" by which they learn to adopt more balanced and responsible gaming behaviors (Buckingham & Burn, 2007). In other words, if one looks at videogames as "cultural objects" (Griswold, 1994), it is possible to study and understand: (a) how they represent reality using specific audiovisual codes and conventions; (b) what kind of meanings and relationships gamers develop from them, and for what "uses and gratifications" (Katz, Blumer et al., 1973); and (c) how they are produced and marketed. Adopting a reflexive attitude, young people can learn how to "make the familiar strange," as Russian formalists would say. This implies that we need to begin by engaging with youth's existing uses of videogames (the "familiar"), with their agenda rather than with ours, with what they find significant rather than with what we think they ought to be doing. (…)

This is not to suggest that we simply celebrate what young people are doing—merely that this is the place to start. (Buckingham, 2003, p. 3)

"Making videogames strange" means that, whereas the typical videogaming experience is based on deep immersion, instinctive and emotive reactions, and spatial-temporal disconnection, videogame literacy aims at developing critical distancing and a more reflexive attitude towards it (Ranieri, 2020). Therefore, drawing from structuralist literary theories and semiotics, young people could look at videogames' narrative structures, characters and worldviews, including stereotypes; they could look at how music and sounds create meaning and provoke certain kinds of reactions/emotions; and they could see how the videogaming experience is entrenched in interactivity (between the game and the player as well as among players) (Burn 2016; Burn & Schott, 2004; Cappello & Andreoletti, 2013). They could also look at more contextual/macro factors that have to do with institutions, markets, and industrial organizations.

This kind of critical analysis, however, is not enough. It must be necessarily complemented with the transformative potential of creative media production meant as "a social practice capable of offering young people a social space in which to perform identities, exploring relationships and imagining alternative futures" (Ranieri, 2020, p. 92). Working in smaller groups, they could create their own videogame engaging with and discussing a whole series of choices (from the script, to the storyboard, to characters' development). Creative production ideally fosters a process of change by which the abstract knowledge developed during critical analysis is lived out through a more subjective appropriation of it. It is where the personal meets and challenges abstract thinking, connecting micro-experiences (of videogaming) with the macro-social factors that condition and make them possible. An interesting example comes from a project carried out in Milan in 2004 by the social workers of the Cooperativa Estia in San Vittore, the largest jail in Northern Italy. The outcome of the project was the production of a docu-fiction *Il Grande Fardello* (the big burden), a title parodying with a pun the TV show *The Big Brother* (in Italian, *Il Grande Fratello*). After a training course on television language, genres (with a focus on reality shows), and video production, the convicts chose to distribute among themselves the various roles of scriptwriters, directors, video operators, actors, etc., giving life to a production playing

at the intersection between parody, self-irony and the emotionality (sometimes dramatic) of biographical storytelling (especially in the moments of the "confessional," when the convicts would tell their personal life stories inside and outside prison). The docu-fiction, in fact, was not distributed initially, due to the censorship ban of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In 2009, the terms of the ban having expired, the production was recovered by the NABA School of Media Design & Multimedia Arts, which re-mastered and re-edited a digital version of it, adding English subtitles. Some scenes of this version are available at https://thebigbother.blogspot.com/

In sum, drawing from media literacy education research and practice, critical digital social work can operate within a "dynamic relationship between *reading* (that is, textual analysis); *writing* (or creative production); and *contextual analysis* (which sets individual reading and writing in a broader social context)" (Buckingham, 2019, p. 69). Although starting from where young people are (however problematic that might be) is crucial, the ultimate aim is to move beyond it, to give them access to critical knowledge and practice, and by doing that, develop a broader understanding and informed (re)action in their daily *onlife* experience.

Some Notes on Future Developments

This article has argued that in critical digital social work, ICTs are not simply considered as innovative *tools* to improve the professionality of social workers, but rather as *life environments* and *systems of representation* shaping individuals' identities and social relationships. Adopting this approach, critical digital social work may trigger a transformative process by which, as we have seen, problems like drugs or digital addiction, eating disorders, depression, crime and violence, and social exclusion, may be deconstructed through a critical analysis of the media representations of them and then reconstructed through creative media productions as subjective experiences of self-expression and collective discussions in search of shared solutions.

However, some unresolved issues need to be taken into account for future developments. A first development should occur at the level of social work training and education. Admittedly, bridging the gap from media literacy education to digital social work

requires the acquisition of a whole set of conceptual and method-ological competencies drawn from disciplinary fields social workers are not so familiar with, such as communication science, pedago-gy, semiotics, cultural studies, and media literacy education. Also, rigorous planning, documentation, and evaluation are important. Doing critical digital social work implies the experimentation with new activities for which traditional criteria and practices may be in-appropriate or even misleading. Social workers would have to find answers to questions like: (a) What is exactly being learnt, and how does this kind of learning occur? (b) How do we assess and eval-uate what we did? For example, in video production activities do we evaluate the *final product* or the *process* that brought to it? and (c) How do we document it, and what do we want to include in the doc-umentation? As we know, most published reports are characterized by quantitative indicators that ultimately show an interest more in what *appears* to be happening than what is actually being achieved. For example, video production activities are frequently evaluated for their capacity to promote "communication and self-expression skills" or "self-esteem and self-awareness" or "active participation and citizenship," but the criteria by which all this should be identi-fied and measured are rarely well defined. Also unclear are the cri-teria for assessing and evaluating the "quality" of creative produc-tions. Think of a video production made by adolescents attending a youth club located in the suburbs of a large city: do we, arguably, want to judge it like expert juries do with the work of professionals? Is "quality" to be found in the product itself, or in the producer's eye, or is it the audience that determines it, and if so, *which* audience anyway? If professional adults were involved in certain phases of the production (in filming or editing, for example), how does that impact on the product's evaluation? And, more importantly, do we really want this kind of intervention in the first place?

Ultimately, any future development should result from a com-plex combination of components put in place at international, na-tional, and/or local levels. Interventions in the field should nec-essarily take into account which components are in play at each level, as well as the shifting relationships enacted between them in specific contexts and times (see Figure 1). *Policy interventions* are needed to provide clear, coherent and authoritative documents that define critical digital social work and provide a rationale for its

implementation at both national and international levels (the role of transnational bodies such as the EU, UNESCO, social workers organizations, or similar is fundamental). *Frameworks and guidelines for practice*, possibly evidence-based, are also important. They should be offering: a clear model of action progression, appropriate to specific locations and contexts; details of specific learning outcomes; and criteria and procedures for assessment and evaluation. However, well written and evidence-based frameworks and guidelines for practice frameworks would be worthless unless social workers are given the possibility to train themselves through high-quality initial and in-service *training programs, materials, and resources*. Additionally, in the logic of the "educational community" (Dryfoos & Maguire, 2019), it is important to plan interventions that create and stabilize *partnerships among social workers, parents, teachers and/or media organizations*. Also, *dialogue and confrontation* among social workers through national and international networks, conferences, and conventions should be fostered. Last but not least, *research and evaluation* should be constantly promoted in order to provide a better understanding at a theoretical and methodological level of the (shifting) issues and concerns that might be of interest for the field. As said, all these are strictly interrelated components. If only one of them is absent or weak, the development of the entire field may be unbalanced. For instance, policy documents or frameworks for practice without practical implementation may turn out to be mere empty rhetoric. Conversely, practical development is fairly meaningless and "blind," so to speak, if there are no clear frameworks or policy inspirational and evidence-based documents. Policy, practice, and research must be interconnected and accountable, especially when public funds are used: development in each area should support (and be supported by) development in the others!

Figure 1. A Framework for Developing Critical Digital Social Work
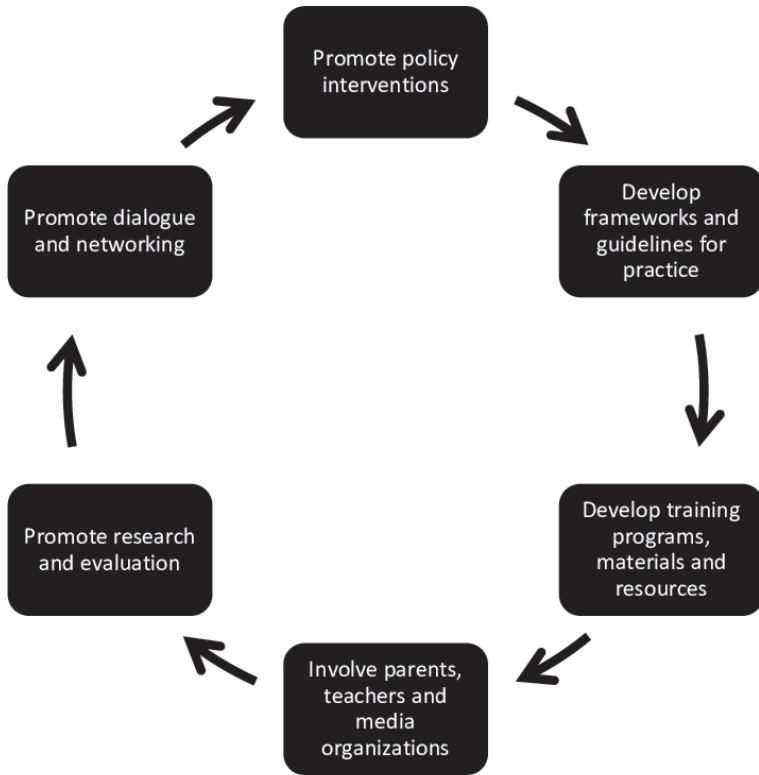
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