An Introduction to

Critical Digital Literacy

Acknowledgement

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The Digital Space and Us.

ONCE UPON A TIME, THERE WAS A MAN, LET'S CALL HIM "A". "A" OPENS HIS FACEBOOK ACCOUNT, AND READS A POST WRITTEN BY HIS NEIGHBOR. THE NEIGHBOR SAYS THAT HE VOTED FOR A CERTAIN POLITICAL CANDIDATE SINCE "90% OF THE POPULATION" VOTED FOR HIM. "A" IS BUSY, SO HE DID NOT HAVE THE TIME TO READ ABOUT POLITICS AND THE CANDIDATES FOR THE ELECTION, BUT THIS POST JUST CUTS ALL THAT EFFORT. "A" DECIDES HE IS GOING TO VOTE FOR THE SAME CANDIDATE THAT THE 90% OF THE POPULATION VOTED FOR. "A" DOES NOT KNOW THAT THE "90% OF THE POPULATION" THAT HIS NEIGHBOUR WAS REFERRING TO WAS THE 5 PEOPLE HE MET AT THE GROCERIES THAT SAME AFTERNOON!
WHO KNEW A FACEBOOK POST CAN HAVE THAT MUCH POWER!

Whether it is a news article on bbc.com, or a post on your neighbour's Facebook, or even a picture on your Instagram's explore page, how we consume and interact with online content on a daily basis shapes our worldviews. Thus, it becomes paramount that we are not passive consumers of online content, but rather, active consumers who are able to analyze, critique, and deconstruct those materials.

Critical Digital Literacy refers to our ability to critically engage with online content. It is the ability to not only use digital technologies effectively but also to critically evaluate the content, tools, and platforms that we encounter in digital spaces.

Critical Digital Literacy equips individuals with the skills needed to navigate and dismantle misinformation, brings awareness to biases, and helps the users to make thoughtful informed judgments about their online experiences.
Developing critical digital literacy in users requires two steps: bringing awareness to the problems and teaching related skills.

Path to Developing Critical Digital Literacy

STEP 1: BRINGING AWARENESS

YOU NAVIGATE THE DIGITAL SPACE THINKING YOU ARE TOTALLY SAFE,
 BUT ARE YOU?

The digital space is a vast and dynamic environment that brings both benefits and risks. The benefits and risks come from the fact that anyone with internet connection can create and share content on the internet.
The first step towards developing critical digital literacy is being aware that harmful content exists in this space. Understanding the types of harmful content and their potential impact is crucial for creating a safer online experience.

HARMFUL DIGITAL CONTENT

Propaganda refers to the strategic building and dissemination of information in a biased or misleading way to influence public opinion or advance a specific agenda. It relies on manipulating the emotions and perceptions of the users through the use of language and framing. Propaganda can be spread through various channels, including media, political speeches, and social platforms, targeting individuals or groups to promote or suppress ideologies or justify actions. In today's digital era, propaganda blends with misinformation and fake news, amplifying reach and impact of both.

- PROPAGANDA
- MISINFORMATION
- FAKE NEWS
- ONLINE HATE
- CYBERBULLYING
- TOXICITY
- INAPPROPREIATE CONTENT
- RADICALIZATION

Misinformation, often shared unintentionally, and fake news, crafted deliberately, can distort perceptions and influence decision-making. Fake news could include false medical advice, manipulated political narratives, and conspiracy theories. Such content thrives on social media due to its ability to exploit cognitive biases and provoke emotional reactions, making it widely shareable. The emotional response can actually trigger the users to share the misinformation even further.

Other types of harmful content in the digital space include, but not limited to: hate speech, cyberbullying, toxicity, inappropriate content, and radicalization.

MITIGATING HARMFUL CONTENT

To combat these types of content, media literacy and critical digital literacy are essential. Teaching individuals, especially young people, to critically evaluate sources, recognize biases, and engage responsibly online can reduce the spread of misinformation, hate, and propaganda.

Path to Developing Critical Digital Literacy

STEP 2: FOSTERING SKILLS

Once you are aware of the risks you can face while navigating the digital space, you can reduce those risks for yourself and others by empowering your engagement with those content by learning critical digital literacy skills.

Critical digital literacy requires a blend of digital and critical thinking skills. This type of literacy extends beyond technical proficiency. Developing these skills involves cultivating a range of interrelated skills.

CRITICAL DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS

1 **Critical Analysis and Thinking:** is the ability to deconstruct digital content, identify biases, evaluate sources, and understand how digital platforms work. It is an important step towards becoming an active consumer of digital content.

Next time you are in the digital space, take a closer look at the content you interact with!

2 **Media Literacy:** refers to understanding how media shapes narratives and influences societal perspectives. These bias driven narratives are hidden and hence require the next skill to uncover them.

Remember, every content you interact with is innately subjective!

Path to Developing Critical Digital Literacy
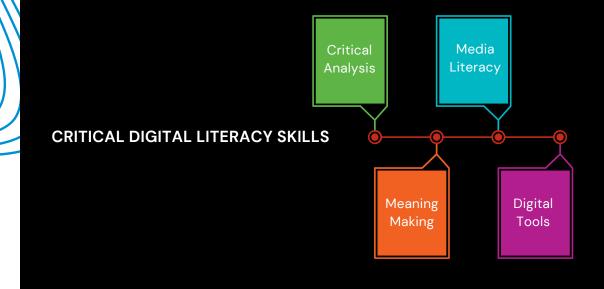
STEP 2: FOSTERING SKILLS

CRITICAL DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS

3 **Meaning Making in any Message:** refers to understanding how language can be used to frame the content in a persuasive way hiding the biases of the entities. This might include the use of certain words and techniques, such as propaganda techniques.

One information can be delivered in a thousand ways, with different effects!

4 **Using Digital Tools and Resources:** there are many online tools that are designed to mitigate some of the harmful online content you might face. For example, fact-checking tools and other digital resources can help you verify the accuracy of information to combat misinformation. You will find some of these resources in the tools section.

CRITICAL DIGITAL LITERACY SKILLS

Critical Analysis

Media Literacy

Meaning Making

Digital Tools

The Importance of Critical Digital Literacy

Critical digital literacy is essential in today's world, where the internet and social media are the primary sources of information and communication. As mentioned before, there are many harmful online content that can sway opinions and actions. Hence, fostering critical digital literacy skills is vital in combating the spread of fake news, harmful stereotypes, and divisive narratives.

BUT DOES IT WORK?

You might think that entities using and sharing news and information are well versed and informed enough that you do not have to question the validity of the content. However, not everything that we engage with on online platforms comes from reputable sources. Furthermore, whether its individual entities or organizations, the creator of the message might have malice intentions. Relying on others to mitigate any harm from online content, even if it is the social media company that the platform belongs to, might not be effective. Especially that those social media companies might have social and political bases. Hence, learning critical digital literacy empowers the individuals to make their own informed judgment.

FINLAND'S FIGHT AGAINST MISINFORMATION

Finland is recognized as a global leader in combating disinformation, primarily through its education system. By integrating critical thinking and media literacy into curricula at all levels—from daycare to adult education—Finland equips its citizens with skills needed to identify and counter fake news. Students learn to analyze sources of information and develop a strong foundation in digital literacy. Such comprehensive education not only improves individual media literacy but also fosters a culture of skepticism and informed engagement with the online content, setting a global benchmark for addressing the challenges of fighting harmful digital content.

Tool and Resources

Here is a list of tools and resources that you can use to evaluate online content, empower yourself, and enrich your learning experience with the following resources.

- What is digital literacy? A comparative review of publications across three language contexts: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2042753020946291
- Critical digital Literacy as a part of a training course: https://evolve-erasmus.eu/training-resources/fc-course-overview/fc-m4-critical-digital-literacy/fc-m4-what-is-critical-digital-literacy/
- Historica Canada's Critical Digital Literacy Education Guide: http://education.historicacanada.ca/en/tools/645
- The Crucial Role of Digital Literacy in Shaping Tomorrow's Students: https://icdl.org/the-crucial-role-of-digital-literacy-in-shaping-tomorrows-students/
- What is media literacy, and why is it important? https://www.commonsensemedia.org/articles/what-is-media-literacy-and-why-is-it-important
- Canada's Centre for Digital Media Literacy: https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/digital-issues
- What is misinformation? https://www.internetmatters.org/issues/fake-news-and-misinformation-advice-hub/learn-about-fake-news-to-support-children/
- Dealing with Propaganda, misinformation, and fake news: https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/dealing-with-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news
- Reliability Online: https://apps.childnet.com/reliability-online/
- The National Association for Media Literacy Education: https://namle.org/
- Google Fact Check Tools: https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com/resources/trainings/verification/google-fact-check-tools/

More Resources

- Why Finland is leading the way in fighting fake new: https://broadview.org/finland-education-youth-disinformation/

- How Finland is fighting fake news - in the classroom: https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/05/how-finland-is-fighting-fake-news-in-the-classroom/

- Finland is winning the war on fake news. What it's learned may be crucial to Western democracy: https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/05/europe/finland-fake-news-intl/