WHOSE FUTURE? WHOSE FACTS?:

A CRITICAL CASE STUDY OF NEWS LITERACY EDUCATION

IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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In the wake of the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections and the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing public attention has been paid to the ability of citizens to use and understand news media, information, and digital technology. Conversations about media literacy—the ability to critically engage with media—are ongoing in the press, schools, and state and federal governments. Most media literacy scholars agree that media literacy is an integral part of an informed and healthy democracy. Yet not all media literacy approaches are the same, and some scholars suggest that mainstream approaches may re-create antidemocratic systems and ideologies. What does it mean when the tools intended to support a healthy democracy reinforce systems of oppression?

A case study of the News Literacy Project (NLP), a nonpartisan, nonprofit education organization, was used to explore this question by examining how ideologies of racism and neoliberal capitalism are perpetuated or challenged in the resources and curriculum created and disseminated by NLP, which positions itself as a leader in news literacy education. Within a theoretical framework of critical political economy of communication, curriculum theory, and Critical Race Theory, NLP as an organization and its Checkology® curriculum were analyzed to understand how ideologies of racism and neoliberal capitalism are replicated or rejected in this curriculum.

NLP depends on corporate and philanthropic funding from both media and nonmedia industries and uses the standards of the professional news industry to define its approach to news literacy education. The Checkology® 101 curriculum, a default set of news literacy lessons available through an online portal, reflects ideologies of neoliberal capitalism through its atomized and individualistic structure, limited critiques of the news industry's economic structures, and language centered on individualism and consumerism. The curriculum also reflects ideologies of racism, which appear to be the unintentional result of reliance on liberal ideals such as aspirations for neutrality, universality, objectivity, and unbiased truth, that manifest in stereotyping, decontextualized information, and incomplete storytelling.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> The only way to get there is to go there.
> —Joel Guldin

Sociopolitical Context

Since the 2016 presidential election in the United States, the notion of fake news has garnered national and international attention. One federal administration later, fake news and doubts about the press continue to challenge the country's relationship with the Fourth Estate. According to a 2021 Pew Research survey, more people report having not much or no trust in journalists than those who report a fair or great amount of trust (Kennedy et al., 2022). Concerns about news and information were exacerbated as rampant disinformation circulated quickly online during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, other systemic disparities became visible. Economic inequality grew, with billionaires increasing their wealth by 70% during the global pandemic, resulting in levels of wealth disparity similar to those during the years preceding the Great Depression (Picchi, 2021). The United States was forced to grapple with its institutional racism as bystanders filmed on their cellphones the deaths of Black men and women at the hands of police in summer 2020 (Stern, 2020), and anti-Asian hate crimes fueled by pandemic-related racism increased by over 300% (Yam, 2022). These inflection points influenced the public conversation about systemic inequality in the United States.

Yet not all public conversations were receptive to discussions that challenged economic and racial hierarchies. Public attention on police brutality and killings of racialized populations, the Black Lives Matter movement, and institutional racism sparked political division, and conservative legislators began proposing policies to limit or ban discussion of race and racism in public schools. Some state governments responded by establishing anti-Critical Race Theory

(CRT) legislation. CRT, a theoretical framework originally used to critique systemic racism in the U.S. legal system, became incendiary among conservative politicians. At the time of this writing, action to limit education about race and CRT is ongoing in 36 states (Stout & Wilburn, 2022). Some of the most extreme legislative examples include are Florida's S.B. 14 and Alabama's H.B. 9, which would codify educational bans on CRT; Oklahoma's H.B. 1775, which was passed in May 2021 to restrict education about racism; Tennessee's S.B. 623 and H.B. 580, which allow the withholding of funding if teachers address institutional racism; and Virginia's 2022 executive order from the governor banning anything related to CRT (Stout & Wilburn, 2022). (See Chalkbeat.org for up-to-date information on legislation related to CRT.) However, while critical thinking about race was being restricted, educational legislation and policies aimed at improving critical thinking about media were simultaneously gaining attention.

Media and News Literacy Education: A Possible Solution?

Through the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections and COVID-19 pandemic, increasing attention has been focused on citizens' abilities to use and understand media, news, information, and digital technology. Concerns address social media, memes, deep fakes, artificial intelligence, the trustworthiness of mainstream media, and what these media mean for democracy. The idea of being able to access, use, and analyze media is foundational to media literacy education (MLE). With concerns about media and democracy prevalent in public conversation, some states are taking action to include MLE in their schooling systems and structures. In fact, over 25% of U.S. states have or are working toward statewide inclusion of media literacy-related education in primary and/or secondary schooling (McNeill, 2022). For example, Illinois was the first U.S. state to legislate media literacy instruction in high school, and Florida, Ohio, Texas, and Colorado have bills requiring media literacy standards, although their

levels of implementation differ (McNeill, 2022). The importance of media literacy is even recognized at the federal level. Michigan Representative Elissa Slotkin sponsored H.R. 4668 (2019), the Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act, which was cosponsored by Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar. Just over two 2 years later, Michigan Representative Brenda Lawrence introduced H.R. 6373 (To Establish the Digital Literacy and Equity Commission, and for Other Purposes, 2022) to create the Digital Literacy and Equity Commission, which would study the current state of and identify best practices for digital and information literacy in the United States. (See Media Literacy Now's website for up-to-date information on current, recent, and failed state and national legislation related to media, information, news, and digital literacy education.)

Before these conversations surfaced in national politics and mainstream media, media literacy educators and scholars had been grappling with questions that are prominent now about media issues related to gatekeepers, credibility, effects, production, and critical consumption. Although many (but not all) media literacy scholars agree that democracy is a basic goal of media literacy, the pathways and approaches to achieve that goal differ. These approaches include using media literacy to protect from media, to empowering critical thinking, and to question issues of power (e.g., race and economics) in media. Thus, understanding what a person or organization means by media literacy and MLE is important as states herald media literacy as a lifeboat for democracy, look to create media literacy policy, employ expert advisory boards and consultants, and implement educational resources.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research was to examine how racism and neoliberal capitalism are replicated or challenged in MLE. Some MLE resources and curricula that aim to be recognized as leaders in this domain are produced by large organizations that are supported by corporate media and philanthropic funding. Because policymakers and educators may rely on such organizations and their leaders to create educational resources and advise on policy for mandated MLE, it is necessary to understand the approach of these organizations to MLE and the ideologies implicitly and explicitly maintained in their educational resources.

To address this issue, a case study was conducted on the News Literacy Project (NLP), one of the largest nonprofit MLE organizations in the United States. Founded by a former journalist, NLP focuses specifically on news literacy education and has gained much attention and recognition as a leading expert in news and information literacy in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 presidential election. During the pandemic, NLP made Checkology®, its virtual classroom, completely free for school use. NLP also provides educators with professional development, connections with professional journalists, newsletters, an online network, and in-person news literacy events.

Because NLP's resources are free and widely available and it continues to position itself as the leading expert in news and information literacy, critical investigation of this organization, its approach to news literacy education, and its curriculum is warranted. In the present study, critical theoretical frameworks (i.e., critical political economy of communication [CPEoC], curriculum theory, and CRT) and document and text analysis methods were used to build a critical political economy of NLP as an organization and to analyze ideologies of racism and neoliberal capitalism in its default curriculum, Checkology® 101.

Research Questions and Overview

Current literature was reviewed to establish the organizing concepts for this study, including neoliberal capitalism, race, MLE, and news literacy. Using historical and social context, this study draws on existing research and theory to highlight the connections and gaps among these concepts. The introduction to MLE includes a short history, a brief explanation of common approaches, a definition of news literacy, and critiques of MLE. Race and racism and neoliberal capitalism are defined here, and the histories of these systems of power and their interplay in education and media are explained. Four research questions were developed based on this literature review.

RQ$_1$: What is the News Literacy Project's political economic structure?

RQ$_2$: How and in what ways does the News Literacy Project's news literacy curriculum challenge and reinforce neoliberal capitalism?

RQ$_3$: How and in what ways does the News Literacy Project's news literacy curriculum challenge and reinforce racism?

RQ$_4$: In what ways does corporate support (both financial and nonfinancial) affect nonprofit news literacy education at the News Literacy Project?

To analyze, interpret, and answer these questions, three theoretical frameworks were used: CPEoC, curriculum theory, and CRT. These critical theories allowed the analysis to focus on a different aspect of NLP and its curriculum. Through document analysis, critical political economy supported building a map of the organization and analyzing its history, economics, finances, politics, and cultural products. This approach provided context for two critical curriculum analyses of Checkology® 101, NLP's default online curriculum. Through document and textual analyses, curriculum theory was used to interrogate how economic power and

oppression (i.e., neoliberal capitalist ideology) function in and through this online curriculum. CRT was used to analyze how racial ideologies are reinforced or challenged in the Checkology® 101 lessons.

Findings show that NLP depends heavily on the professional standards, financial and in-kind support, and volunteerism of the professional news industry. Thus, NLP's informational materials, resources, and curriculum are influenced by the industry. For NLP, professional corporate news sets the bar for quality news, which includes accepting and elevating liberal ideals of neutrality, fairness, and universalism that also underlie capitalist and racist ideologies and stereotypical images and decontextualized stories that replicate racist ideologies. The findings suggest that NLP's relationship with and dependence on the news media industry might shape the type of MLE that this organization produces in unintended ways.

There are limitations to this research. This includes the difficulty associated with isolating racism and neoliberal capitalism from other intersecting systems of power, such as sexism and ableism. Although NLP provides some international resources and services, only the U.S. perspective was considered in this analysis. The productive aspects of NLP's curriculum and it's implementation also were not addressed. Additionally, the present study focuses on only those lessons included in the Checkology® 101 sequences for middle and high school students; it did not include all available lessons. Although the study scope and scale were limited, these limitations provide opportunities for future research. Further discussion of the study limitations is addressed in Chapter VII.

In the critical tradition, this research was conducted to encourage change in media literacy education. Recommendations based on the findings include eliminating corporate funding, reducing dependency on corporate news industry standards and approaches to news as

guideposts for what it means to be news literate, explaining the context for stories and images used in news literacy instruction, and including purposefully issues of race and economics as part of news literacy.

Conclusion

This study began with by identifying the current sociopolitical context in which the research occurred. The research problem and purpose were then identified, followed by the research questions, theoretical frames, and methods. Despite study limitations, recommendations were made based on the findings.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

A foundational assumption of media literacy is that being media literate is necessary for a healthy democracy. This assumption may seem obvious: in our fragmented and expansive mediascape, critical and analytical thinking about information, entertainment, and persuasion seems to be the best way to prepare citizens to engage thoughtfully with the civic and social responsibilities of living in a democracy (Lewis & Jhally, 1998). However, how does one learn to be media literate? Who decides what that kind of thinking looks like? What kind of resources are available and used to teach media literacy? Who creates those resources, and what kind of assumptions are built into them? If ideologies, such as neoliberalism and racism, that stand counter to democracy and democratic participation are baked into MLE resources, can media literacy support a healthy democracy?

These major concepts were explored to identify gaps in the literature and make progress toward filling those gaps. To do so, the concepts of *media literacy* and MLE, *race* and *racism* in education and media, and *neoliberal capitalism* were defined. How these concepts have been used together in prior research was evaluated to identify unanswered questions or disconnections. Research questions were developed to contribute to filling the existing research gaps.

Media Literacy Education

The National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) defines media literacy as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of media" (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2021b). This intentionally broad definition expands

traditional notions of literacy to include production and meaning-making from digital, electronic, and audiovisual media in addition to print-based media. The breadth of this definition also allows media literacy to take a variety of forms and approaches, including production, criticism, and media effects (Hobbs, 1998; Kamerer, 2013; RobbGrieco, 2011).

MLE is "the educational field dedicated to teaching the skills associated with media literacy" (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2021b). NAMLE includes both school-based and non-school or third spaces as settings where MLE can and should occur. Despite these handy definitions, MLE scholars and educators have limited agreement on the field's scope and goals (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Christ & Potter, 1998; Hobbs, 1998; Potter, 2013; Share, 2015). However, these widely accepted, referenced, and broad definitions provided by the U.S. national organizing body serve here to define media literacy and MLE.

Historical Trajectory of MLE

Although media literacy history is not well documented and not well defined (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Nkana, 2014), scholars have suggested that media literacy grew from rhetorical, literature, and films studies (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Kamerer, 2013), and its growth parallels the rise of communication and media studies in the academy in the United States (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Media have a long history of presence in schools: historical records indicate that schools showed silent films as early as the 1890s (Druick, 2016), and guides for using films to teach appeared around the 1920s (Kamerer, 2013). In the 1930s, media education focused on protecting students from the negative influences of media (Dehli, 2009; Nkana, 2014). By the 1960s, a film studies approach to MLE began to appear more regularly in U.S. schooling (Delhi, 2009; Kamerer, 2013; Nkana, 2014) as an innovative approach to education supported by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Friesem et al., 2014) and as a progressive, student-

centered, skill-based approach under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations (RobbGrieco, 2011). Around this time, differing approaches created an enduring split among educators regarding emphasizing production or analysis (Hobbs, 1998; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009).

The 1972 Surgeon General report connecting television to antisocial behaviors brought television into the discussion about media education (Nkana, 2014). Also at this point, the importance of media literacy for citizenship and civic participation entered the conversation (Ashley, 2019). Media education grew until the 1980s, when federal funding for research and professional development was cut (Nkana, 2014). This decade also saw the Reagan administration push for direct instruction and standards-based education (RobbGrieco, 2011) in response to the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), which manufactured an educational crisis and advocated for educational privatization. Yet in the 1980s there was a shift from a media literacy that protected students from media to one that positioned students an active audience (Delhi, 2009). In the 1990s, attention to socioeconomic and political issues in education increased (RobbGrieco, 2011), and media literacy educators took on socioeconomic issues through critical approaches to media, sparking discussions about the role of MLE as a political or apolitical pursuit (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009).

In the 2000s, access to technology expanded in homes and schools, and MLE focused on students understanding and using software and hardware (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Personal digital devices defined media during the 2010s. With the increase in content creation resulting from digital technology proliferation and the decrease of traditional gatekeepers, the focus of MLE has been understanding truth and fighting mis- and disinformation. This review of the

history of MLE clearly shows that the ebbs and flows of MLE do not operate independently from the larger tides of educational trends in the United States but are deeply affected by them.

Three Approaches to MLE

Despite a few unifying and foundational ideas, MLE is fragmented (Kamerer, 2013), with multiple approaches to thinking about and implementing media literacy. This fragmentation reflects the mediascape and the diversity of views, perspectives, epistemological orientations, and approaches within the fields of mass communication and media studies. Kamerer (2013) identified four main strands of MLE. The first three strands are (a) protectionism, a positivist and effects-based view of MLE; (b) media arts, which is based on learning through media production; and (c) media literacy, which draws from semiotic and rhetorical analyses. These three strands may be categorized as acritical approaches to media literacy based on their more neutral approach to analysis and pedagogy (Higdon et al., 2021). The fourth approach is critical media literacy education (CMLE), which engages questions of power. Because of their similarities, media arts and media literacy collapse under the umbrella term "empowerment" (RobbGrieco, 2011). The following outlines the three main strands: protectionism, empowerment, and CMLE.

Protectionism

Protectionism emerged from the positivist, media effects tradition. In this approach, media literacy is viewed as an intervention to mediated harm. Thus, the goal of media literacy for protectionists is to teach people to identify and avoid the negative effects of media (Hobbs, 1998; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Early media education followed the protective approach (Nkana, 2014), but today's protectionism draws from media scholars Neil Postman and Marshall McLuhan (Delhi, 2009; Share, 2015; Thevenin, 2012). W. James Potter (2004), a foundational voice in this

approach, developed a cognitive model of media literacy to explain how media users can protect themselves from these undesirable harms. Protectionism informs media literacy interventions developed to protect children and youth from sex, violence, and health-related (e.g., smoking and alcohol) harms.

Protectionism has been criticized for "its decontextualization and antimedia bias that oversimplify the complexity of our relationship with media" (Share, 2015, p. 11). Hobbs (2011b) stated that protectionism is an insufficient approach if MLE is used only to avoid harm. Hobbs suggested that instead MLE requires an empowerment approach that does not teach students what to think but rather how to solve problems and think critically in ways that lead to informed choices and healthy lifestyles. Hobbs also critiqued protectionism for inadequately addressing notions of constructedness in media, meaning that media are not value free because inherently biased humans create them. Thus, scholars such as Hobbs and leaders of NAMLE generally have rejected the limited scope and focus on the effects of protectionism in favor of the empowerment approach.

Empowerment

Unlike protectionism, the empowerment approach generally favors an active audience model. Broadly, the empowerment approach is built on John Dewey's educational pragmatism, the Frankfurt School, and Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy (Thevenin, 2012), a set of diverse and sometimes contradictory philosophies (RobbGrieco, 2011). Drawing heavily on Masterman's (1985) *Teaching the Media*, MLE through the empowerment is framed as a future-focused project that develops students' critical autonomy and recognizes media literacy as an essential competency for citizens' democratic participation. Contemporary voices of the empowerment approach advocate for MLE to be inquiry based, to expand *literacy* beyond

reading and writing, and to develop healthy skepticism instead of cynicism by engaging a variety

of ideologies across a range of media (Rogow, 2011; Thoman & Jolls, 2004).

As arguably the broadest approach to MLE, various models exist within empowerment

MLE. The demystification model promotes critical analysis of ideological messaging (Leaning,

2017) by employing semiotics to address issues of representation (Gaines, 2010). The creative

participation model (Leaning, 2017) or the media arts model (Share, 2015) centers on active

media creation, Hobbs's third pillar of media literacy (Kamerer, 2013). Although all approaches

in the empowerment model encourage student engagement in some form of media production,

creative participation makes production the goal of MLE. Overall, these empowerment

approaches work to balance critical analysis and media production (Cappello, 2019). However,

empowerment models are not immune to criticism. For example, empowerment models can be

apolitical and run the risk of perpetuating social reproduction and dominant ideologies (Share,

2015). Or their focus on technological and production skills may inadvertently lead to the

reproduction of commercial structures without applying critical analysis (Share, 2015).

CMLE

Literacy criticism, on which media literacy is built, prevented the introduction of

audience and politics into MLE until the 1980s (Cappello, 2019). However, Lewis and Jhally

(1998) critiqued Hobbs's stance that media literacy should not engage with media activism or

politics. They instead proposed that a necessary part of media literacy is moving beyond text to

context and thinking beyond the media artifact to critique media institutions. This is particularly

necessary to "develop sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers" (Lewis &

Jhally, 1998, p. 109) in a world saturated with commercialized media messages. Through

consideration of the larger social, political, economic, and historical contexts in which media

messages are produced, media literacy becomes "more than the analysis of messages, it is about an awareness of why those messages are there" (Lewis & Jhally, 1998, p. 111). From this perspective, media literacy should be political because it should be contextual.

CMLE rejects the possibility of apolitical MLE. Instead, the critical approach accepts that media are inherently political, thus media literacy is an inherently political endeavor necessary to make sense of those politics and social structures. Critical media literacy leaders Kellner and Share (2005) identified the goals of CMLE: (a) to locate power in media texts and determine the source(s) of that power, (b) to create counterhegemonic texts in response, and (c) to attend to issues of social justice. To support CMLE at all levels, Share (2015) outlined five principles necessary to be media literate: media are constructed and are not direct representations of reality, media rely on semiotics and can suggest ideas and meanings about the world, audiences are active and can have different interpretations of the same text, media texts carry implicit and explicit biases because people construct them, and media are driven by power and profit.

Ecomedia literacy (López, 2014, 2019), a systems-based approach that integrates humans, technology, and the environment as meaningful actors in MLE, facilitates the sixth principle of CMLE: entities—both human and nonhuman—are advantaged and disadvantaged by media texts (Beach et al., 2017). Despite these intentions of actively engaging CMLE for political critique, a long-standing concern is that the mainstreaming of MLE may result in depoliticized content and skills (Luke, 2000).

Criticism and Convergence

Some general critiques of MLE have been produced. Hobbs's (1998) "seven great debates" addressed viewpoints and disagreements about media literacy, thereby identifying sites of criticism in MLE's conceptualization and implementation. These debates bring up such issues

as the impact of protectionism on critical thinking, the celebratory nature of production-based media education, and the role of pop culture in media literacy. However, two questions are central to the present research topic: Should MLE be political, or should it be taught as neutrally as possible? Can corporations support MLE, or does corporate support fundamentally compromise MLE? Despite being written about more than 20 years ago, these debates continue to drive conversations and draw criticisms of MLE.

Another challenge for MLE is its fuzzy terms and definitions and definitions that are used. Three such literacies that are often used interchangeably but address different concepts are *media literacy*, or the ability to access, use, and create media; *information literacy*, or the ability to locate and use information to solve a problem; and *digital literacy*, or the ability to find and use information from a variety of digital sources (Koltay, 2011). Differentiating these literacies creates new questions: Because of the social and technological changes to media, information, and digital technologies, are these separations artificial? Should media literacy be treated as an umbrella term that includes all these literacies, or is it necessary to think of them separately?

Buckingham (1998) added another layer of criticism to media education by critiquing pop culture pedagogy and media pedagogy; he suggested that teaching with media and pop culture is often seen as radical, but it is not inherently progressive and can oppress and promote dominant ideologies. Buckingham stated that media education and pop culture pedagogy will not be meaningful until they are informed by and grounded in school-based empirical evidence.

Despite the different approaches, the importance of MLE increases as education is more networked and dependent on media and mediated information and more valuable as students are expected to learn less content and more critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Jolls, 2015). Nearly ten years ago, Hobbs (2011c) wrote her vision for what MLE should be doing by the next

decade. Three of the most salient goals included were defining learning objectives for MLE, connecting in-class experiences to authentic encounters outside school, and integrating better MLE better across curricular subjects. Although the first goal is still unrealized because of ongoing disagreements about what media literacy is or should do, progress has been made toward reaching the other two goals.

News Literacy: A Subfield of Media Literacy

News literacy, a specialized subset of skills and concepts necessary for understanding news media, falls under the larger tent of media literacy (Ashley, 2019; Mihailidis, 2012; Vraga et al., 2020). Like the larger field of media literacy, news literacy draws on historical and colloquial understandings of literacy and applies them as skills for news consumption and production (Malik et al., 2013). As with media literacy, conceptions of what counts as news literacy and how it is taught differ (Ashley, 2019; Maksl et al., 2017; Vraga et al., 2020).

Defining News Literacy

Depending on a scholar's orientation to the area, news literacy definitions and approaches differ slightly. For example, based on the definition from the Stony Brook University Center for News Literacy, news literacy may be "an ability to use critical thinking skills to judge reliability and credibility of news reports, whether they come via print, TV, or the Internet" (Fleming, 2014, p. 150). Or news literacy also may be a loose reinterpretation of NAMLE's media literacy definition: "News literacy involves accessing, understanding, evaluating, and interpreting news messages" (Farmer, 2019, p. 4). Aligned with empowerment goals, news literacy that focuses on critical thinking and communication skills can create opportunities for audiences to evaluate the "fairness, transparency and accuracy" (Hobbs, 2011a, p. 50) of news. Yet critical thinking alone is insufficient unless it also teaches "the value of news and information, the power of media

messages, the role that the public can—and should—play in setting the public agenda" (Moeller, 2012, p. 192). Vraga et al. (2020) provided the most specific definition: "knowledge of the personal and social processes by which news is produced, distributed, and consumed, and skills that allow users some control over these processes" (p. 5) across the domains of context, creation, content, circulation, and consumption.

However, Malik et al. (2013) suggested that more important than a singular definition of news literacy is an agreed-upon set of goals and outcomes: understanding news and its societal role, building motivation to follow news, identifying news, critically thinking while consuming news, and being able to create news. Moeller (2012) added to these general goals: "The goal of news literacy is to give people the power to use their rights of free expression, to defend their access to information, to secure their participation in the process of governing, to help all voices be heard" (p. 192). The present study used the goals outlined by Malik et al. (2013) and Moeller (2012) to define news literacy as the skills and abilities necessary to understand news in a societal context, to locate and identify news, to follow and consume news, and to think critically about news generally so all people can engage in free expression and participatory government.

Historical Trajectory of News Literacy

News literacy is a younger area than MLE (Fleming, 2014), and some argue that it has been integrated into schools without sufficient research surrounding its inclusion (Ashley et al., 2013). This may be because news literacy is ad hoc. In many ways, news literacy is a response to the 21st century's changing news and information environment, the shifting roles and presence of the press in online spaces, and the imperative to understand news for full participation in civic life (Fleming, 2014; Luhtala & Whiting, 2018; Mihailidis, 2012; Moeller, 2012). The same is true of news literacy competencies, such as attending to source bias and switching between

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different modes of information and communication (Luhtala & Whiting, 2018). The focus on news and requisite skills and competencies is what separates news literacy from the broader goals of MLE (Fleming, 2014).

The origin of news literacy appears somewhat contested. News literacy expert Ashley (2019) cited a 1998 article in *Library Quarterly* as an early call for news literacy and Juris Dilevko, the author, as an early founder of news literacy. Howard Scheneider, the founder and dean of the journalism school at Stony Brook University and executive director of their Center for News Literacy that started in 2007, is seen by some as originally distilling news literacy into its own entity (Fleming, 2014). Alan C. Miller, former *Los Angeles Times* investigative journalist and founder and chief executive officer of NLP, takes credit for introducing the idea of news literacy while talking to middle school students in 2006 (News Literacy Project, 2019d). Regardless of who the originator was, news literacy education as a field is not yet 25 years old.

News literacy and news literacy education are not without criticism. Vraga et al. (2020) wrote that news literacy has been undertheorized by researchers who focus on instruction and journalistic norms. Hobbs (2011a) posed reservations about some news literacy education practices, such as "telling war stories" (p. 50) and failing to engage critical thinking about the industry, treating news literacy like journalism for those who are not journalists by prioritizing production over analysis, and valorizing journalism by focusing on the industry's ideals while ignoring its flaws. Ashley (2019) claimed that news literacy research has "stalled at its current level of proliferation" (p. 1158), in part because it lacks a unified approach. Ultimately, these criticisms are not insurmountable but worthy of acknowledgment and critical attention.

Race and Racism

Race and racism are ubiquitous and foundational social problems in the United States. This section includes definitions of race and racism for this research and an overview of race and racism in education and in media and news. The next conceptual area, neoliberal capitalism, is then introduced.

Defining Race and Racism in the U.S. Context

Defining race is challenging and arguably unproductive. To illustrate, the U.S. Census Bureau (2020) provides five race categories: white, Black or African American, American Indian or Native Alaskan, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.[1] The white racial category includes people of European, Middle Eastern, and North African descent; however, this categorization whitewashes the unique experiences of othering faced by those of Middle Eastern and North African descent (Elsayed, 2020; Measher, 2020). The U.S. Census definitions and format also do not allow answers that fully reflect how respondents see their own ethnic and racial ancestry or how Americans more broadly understand ethnoracial identity (Alba, 2018). Conversely, the rejection of rigid racial categories and characteristics more authentically reflects the dynamic, fluid nature of race in the United States (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976).

The present study follows the practice of leaving race undefined to avoid erasing racialized experiences. However, that does not mean that race is not real. Race is complex, personal, social, and political. In the United States, race is organized to divide whites from all others while creating the illusion that whiteness is not in itself a race; this facilitates white

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[1] Although the American Psychological Association stipulates capitalization of the word "white" when referring to race, this word is styled as lowercase herein. Capitalization of "Black" in reference to race recognizes a shared history and culture in the United States, whereas white Americans do not have that shared history and culture. Capitalization of "white" also reflects the practices of white supremacists.

supremacy and nationalism (House, 1999) and results in racism, or "the cultural, economic, or social expression of […] inferiority" (Behnken & Smithers, 2015, p. xii) based on race.

Racism operates at multiple levels. *Individual racism* is the "action taken by one individual toward another because the latter is identified with a certain group" (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976, p. 45), whereas *institutional racism* is the "action taken by a social system or institution which results in negative outcomes for members of a certain group or groups" (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976, p. 45). This research investigated race and racism at the institutional level.

The 1968 Kerner Commission provided groundbreaking documented evidence of institutional racism in the United States (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968). The Kerner Commission was convened in 1967 by President Lyndon B. Johnson to investigate extended civil unrest, protests, and riots among communities of color across the United States. The Kerner Commission found that institutional failings across multiple sectors resulted in embedded, institutional racism. Their findings showed that segregation, inadequate funding, and discrimination contributed to institutional racism in education and that negative representation, poor coverage of race relations, and limited presence of people of color in journalism and media production perpetuated racism in news media. Although the Kerner Commission's report has been critiqued for its vagueness about white racism, centering white normativity in its analyses, proposing white benevolence as a solution for inequality, and minimizing racism in institutions such as policing (Hughey, 2018), it revealed that institutional racism negatively affects people of color and the country broadly.

Racism and Education

Racial stereotypes justify racist ideologies and politics in education (Tate, 1997), causing students of color to face systematic disadvantages through educational policies built on racial oppression (Dixon, 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). However, some have argued that race is undertheorized in education, meaning that class and gender—where historically efforts have been focused—are not enough to explain all inequality and inequity in American education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This section presents an overview of race and racism in U.S. education, beginning with history and educational reforms and concluding with modern educational policies and practices.

Race-based educational inequality in the United States is nothing new. Historically, "whites control the bulk of the educational system" (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976, p. 1), leaving other racial minority groups ignored or underserved. This repression has occurred through geographic segregation; under-resourced physical facilities; poor teacher training, support, and retention; and failure to provide culturally responsive education to minority communities (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976). These actions have been historically justified as natural or "inevitable limitations" (Weinberg, 1977, p. 2) in support of the longstanding assimilation function of U.S. education through the legitimation of racial discrimination and subsequently economic class inequality (Nasaw, 1979). Therefore, racism in education has ramifications beyond school walls into the larger structure of society.

Racial Histories of Education in the United States

Racism in the United States at the advent of public schooling looked different among different racialized minority groups. No racial-ethnic groups function as a monolith, individuals within groups may have different experiences, and general trends cannot capture the nuance of

individual tribes and communities across time and space. However, understanding group histories can provide context for a better understanding of current social conditions. (For histories of Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native American schooling in the United States, see Nasaw, 1979; Weinberg, 1977, 1997.)

Racialized groups in the United States have faced unique institutional and systemic barriers. Black communities faced and continue to face the implications of slavery and the myth of Black ignorance (Nasaw, 1979; Weinberg, 1977). Latinx students have experienced challenges of class inequality and bilingualism in an English-dominant system (Jiménez, 2004; Weinberg, 1977). Asian and Asian American students have been homogenized as the model minority, which erases the social inequality many Asian ethnic groups and nationalities have experienced in U.S. education (Hu-DeHart, 2016; Weinberg, 1997). The history of education for Native Americans is inextricable from genocide (Weinberg, 1977).

In addition to their unique histories, racialized communities share common experiences in education. Minoritized groups have been economically and socially subordinated, excluded from or tokenized within educational institutions, taxed for public education without receiving its benefits, and subjected to assimilationist policies and politics (Ayscue & Orfield, 2016; Gándara, 2017; House, 1999; Hu-DeHart, 2016; Jiménez, 2003; Jones, 2012; Nasaw, 1977; Noguera, 2016; Paul, 2004; Weinberg, 1977, 1997.) Each group also has a history of using political power to demand legal measures to gain access to schooling (Jones, 2020; Weinberg, 1977). These histories illustrate that education is not neutral, it is political.

Post-Segregation Educational Reforms

Educational reforms have occurred across a variety of sectors, including the organization of schooling finance, curricula, ability grouping, retention, and testing (House, 1999). Turning

points in educational reform across these sectors have impacted education for racialized groups in the United States. However, educational reforms have had varied and are not without consequences.

Court rulings, governmental reports, and academic research have affected race and racism in educational policy. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, in which racial segregation in schools was declared illegal, can be critiqued for failing to produce sweeping systemic changes in segregation and for creating a form of cultural genocide through the closure of Black community schools (Noblit & Green, 2015). Covert educational segregation continues today through geography, race, and poverty (Ayscue & Orfield, 2016; Noguera, 2016). Later, the 1983 *A Nation at Risk* report (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) manufactured an educational crisis to promote privatizing education, embellished the failings of urban education to capitalize on the white backlash against school desegregation and racial justice, and painted the narrative of desegregated education as an eternal failure (Noblit & Green, 2015). A decade later, *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994) perpetuated the myth of race-based failure in education by arguing that achievement can be attributed to genetic differences among racial groups, which explained why racial groups were unsuccessful in American education.

President Lyndon B. Johnson's domestic programs, collectively called The Great Society, increased the role of the federal government in education policy (Kantor & Lowe, 1995) by creating compensatory education programs, such as Head Start for preschools and Title I for economically and socially disadvantaged elementary and secondary school (Marcus & Stickney, 1981). These programs were built on the racist assumptions that poor, racialized communities were deficient for suitable child development and education and that these programs could fix

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these so-called deficiencies. Marcus and Stickney (1981) suggested that the logic of compensatory education failed in the long term because of its racist implications.

Modern federal educational reforms continue this legacy. President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind program did not account for school contexts and instead mandated one-size-fits-all approaches, such as standardized testing, which disadvantaged underresourced schools with racial minorities by failing to provide culturally responsive education (Noguera, 2016). President Barack Obama's Race to the Top grants and Common Core State Standards Initiative allowed for more flexibility in testing but continued the legacy of standardization with nationally prescribed benchmarks that leave out underserved communities.

Current Racialized Problems in U.S. Education

In 1976, Sedlacek and Brooks wrote that racism occurred in U.S. elementary and secondary schooling in various ways, including geographic segregation, white teachers and administrators who were unprepared to address race in teaching and leadership, white-centric or poor-quality multicultural curricula, and insufficient funding and personnel to equip schools adequately to address race-related problems. Those issues remain, and this continued history of racism in education contributes to two educational problems that disproportionately affect students of color: the school-to-prison pipeline and the achievement gap.

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the progression from punitive school discipline to incarceration that disproportionately affects Black and Brown students who are overrepresented in suspensions and expulsions, referrals to law enforcement, and arrests because of zero-tolerance policies through structural mechanism such as the pathologization of nonwhite students; culturally incompetent adult leadership, and replication of the carceral state in schools (Oluo, 2018). The achievement gap, which exists largely along racial divisions, is often seen as

an outcome of poorly motivated students or ineffective teachers that can be remedied through pressure, monitoring, and standardized assessment, but this view fails to account for the larger socioeconomic and political issues of the performance gap, the preparation gap, the allocation gap, the parent gap, and the teacher-student gap (Noguera, 2016). Allegedly liberal initiatives, such as Teach For America, are touted as mechanisms for closing the achievement gap, yet they end up displacing Black and Brown teachers from local communities (White, 2016), engaging neoliberal ideology (Barnes et al., 2016), and exacerbating inequality. Although it looks different today from the legal segregation and residential schools of the past, racism persists in U.S. education.

Racism and News Media

Like education, media function as a structural institution that produces, maintains, and spreads ideas of race and racism in the United States. Race and racism are "critical organizing principles" (Behnken & Smithers, 2015, p. ix) in media and play historical and contemporary roles in establishing, perpetuating, and controlling stereotypes and negative narratives about racial minorities (Behnken & Smithers, 2015; González & Torres, 2011). This section provides an overview of race and racism in media, with an emphasis on news media. Stereotyping is defined with acknowledgment of the role of representation in media, then the historical embeddedness of racism in the news media industries through technology, economics, policy, and lack of diversity in news production is addressed, concluding with current systemic issues of racism and media.

Mediated Stereotyping and Race

Representation in media is a central concern of scholars and audiences. Stereotyping is commonly associated with thinking about racial representation in media. Stereotypes in media

are "systematic representations" (Seiter, 2017, p. 184) of groups of people that are maintained across a variety of mediated forms and allow "a way for powerful groups to characterize subordinate groups" (Seiter, 2017, p. 184). Media provide the information used to create, prime, maintain, and reinforce stereotypes about groups of people (Oliver et al., 2007). Through this mediated process, racial-ethnic minority groups are othered in and through media representations (Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2019). This othering can occur as white actors representing people of other races and ethnicities, racial character archetypes in narratives, fictional and nonfictional depictions of race used to reinforce and naturalize racism, and racial representations that appeal to white fears (Behnken & Smithers, 2015; Duiguid & Rivers, 2000).

Stereotyping has a long history in U.S. media through racialized images in advertising, logos, and mascots (Behnken & Smithers, 2015), narratives of inferiority in newspaper stories (González & Torres, 2011), villainous tropes in wartime propaganda (González & Torres, 2011), and threatening and dangerous criminals in reality television and news (Oliver, 2003). News narratives across networks are relatively consistent in producing racial stereotypes and cues that result in white-dominant narratives, regardless of who is reporting, indicating that the systemic and structural nature of stereotypes cannot be sufficiently addressed through individual changes (Sonnett et al., 2015). Stereotypes matter in terms of representation and effects.

Media effects research shows has shown that negative media representations can negatively shape majority-group thoughts and decisions about racial-ethnic group minority members; conversely, positive representations of racial-ethnic minorities can counteract the effects of stereotyping (Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2019). A companion to stereotyping, symbolic annihilation is absence of or in representation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Means Coleman & Yochim, 2008). Stereotyping and symbolic annihilation influence how dominant or

majority groups understand othered groups and contribute to how stereotyped groups understand themselves and their group identities (Ramasubramanian & Sousa, 2019).

Racism in Media Industries: Technology, Economics, Ownership, and Policy

Racism is historically embedded in the foundations and development of media industries in the United States, including media technology. For example, telegraphs' truncated message lengths decontextualized and reduced the information that could be communicated, which ultimately reinforced stereotyping in news (González & Torres, 2011). Introduced in the 1830s and widespread by the 1840s, the telegraph also centralized and commercialized news. The cost of the telegraph made it accessible to wealthy newspapers first, cutting out small minority newspapers (González & Torres, 2011). In radio broadcasting, the cost of entry and access to technology resulted in almost entirely white ownership, which perpetuated white narratives and minority stereotypes (González & Torres, 2011). The 1950s television boom created competition with radio, which meant appealing to niche minority markets while re-creating and broadcasting stereotypes (Duiguid & Rivers, 2000; González & Torres, 2011). In the 1960s and 1970s, minority media ownership and content increased, but media industry deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in consolidation and conglomeration that largely forced out minority ownership (González & Torres, 2011). Community Antenna TV, cable's predecessor, faced the same fate, as local minority-owned media production and distribution was subsumed by corporate media (González & Torres, 2011), demonstrating the pivotal role policy and government can have on race and racism in media.

The Federal Communications Commission introduced in 1949 the Fairness Doctrine, imperfect and ineffectively enforced, which required broadcast stations to address local issues and air multiple viewpoints on these public topics and provided one mechanism for minority

groups to get a voice in the news (González & Torres, 2011; Perlman, 2012). The FCC ended the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 and removed all related language from official policy by 2011 to support privatization (Boliek, 2011; Perlman, 2012), which harmed minority ownership in media. Other policies enabling deregulation and privatization also harmed minority media ownership. In 1972, the FCC did not open cable for public access and instead privatized the technology, creating virtual monopolies that cut out minority interests and workers; this deregulation of cable continued with the 1984 Cable Act and the 1996 Telecommunications Act (González & Torres, 2011).

The Kerner Commission critiqued the media and its governing policy and concluded that the United States was racist and that the media industries were complicit in this racism. The Commission's recommendations included employing more Black people in media organizations, increasing Black visibility in journalism, and creating an Institute of Urban Communications to develop Black journalists (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968). The late 1960s and 1970s saw integration in newsrooms and the increased on-screen presence of Black people in news and entertainment television (Duiguid & Rivers, 2000; González & Torres, 2011). Although the Kerner Commission determined in 1968 that corporate and mainstream media in the United States disseminated white, majoritarian perspectives and enabled racism, this remains largely unchanged today (Duiguid & Rivers, 2000).

Resistance to Racism in Media

Media industries perpetuate racism and racialized harm through representation, technology, economics, ownership, and policy, but racialized minority groups are not helpless victims. Although white-owned media have largely dominated media industries throughout U.S. history, nonwhite-owned media has and continues to exist. Minority presses existed before the

Civil War era but often have been overlooked or ignored, which makes U.S. press history appear exclusively white when it was not (González & Torres, 2011). The following provides a brief history of race and media in the United States. (For a comprehensive history of race and news, see González & Torres, 2011.)

Various racial and ethnic groups had newspapers or other forms of the press for information dissemination. The Spanish-language press emerged in the 1800s, followed by widespread growth (González & Torres, 2011). The Native American press emerged in the 1830s; however, these newspapers largely ceased at the onset of the Civil War when Native Americans took leadership roles at larger, white-owned papers during and after Reconstruction (González & Torres, 2011). The Black press had its first wave in the 1830s, a second wave in the 1940s, and its heyday in the mid-1900s, after which its popularity decreased (Duiguid & Rivers, 2000; González & Torres, 2011). Although the historical records of Chinese-language newspapers are few, the world's first (but short-lived) Chinese-language newspaper, *Chinese Daily*, began in Sacramento in 1856 (González & Torres, 2011).

Unlike the European immigrant press of the same time, the "colored" press did not seek assimilation into white culture; minority newspapers addressed the concerns of their community by breaking with standardized white practices. For example, the Black press introduced advocacy journalism that focused on race-based issues and existed separately from the class-focused white muckrakers (González & Torres, 2011). Years later and despite having limited access to media production or ownership, minority groups challenged television and radio stereotyping and exclusion in the 1940s and 1950s by coordinating mass boycotts, circumventing federal regulations as radio "border blasters," and asserting public pressure on the FCC (González & Torres, 2011). Black and Latinx groups in the 1960s and 1970s challenged local

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news stations' broadcasting licenses and built grassroots media reform organizations, which likely influenced the Reagan administration to defund the FCC and deregulate media industries in the 1980s (González & Torres, 2011).

Racialized minority groups have a history of resistance with media. From establishing newspapers that reflect community needs, to boycotting racist television shows, to holding white-owned stations accountable for their licensing, minority groups have influenced the shape of media industries and policy.

Diversity in the Newsroom

Whiteness has historically dominated the American newsroom through access and ownership; thus, journalism has a history of low diversity (Jenkins, 2012). Minority journalist associations grew out of the Civil Rights movement in the 1970s and 1980s, taking on the role of industry watchdogs. Today, these organizations provide professional networks among journalists of racial-ethnic minorities. Yet change in newsroom diversity remains limited.

Racial minority presence in media jobs does not reflect racial minority presence in the general U.S. population (Duiguid & Rivers, 2000). There is documented dissatisfaction among minoritized journalists and newsroom staffers, causing these journalists to leave the news profession at higher rates than found for white journalists (Meyer & Gayle, 2015). The 2019 ASNE Newsroom Diversity Survey indicates that less than 25% of newsroom employees are people of color and less than 20% of news management roles are filled by people of color (News Leaders Association, 2019). Although racial minority populations in the United States are growing, the number of journalism jobs held by members of minority populations is declining, which is a concern because news continues to not reflect American diversity and to re-create white perspectives and narratives (Jenkins, 2012). However, minorities, particularly Black

Americans, have gained greater entry into media professions (Duiguid & Rivers, 2000). The long-term shift to a more diverse newsroom after the Kerner Commission report is significant because it has increased minority presence and visibility (Loessberg & Koskinen, 2018).

One assumption of increased newsroom diversity is that it leads to better coverage of racialized populations (Duiguid & Rivers, 2000). However, minority reporters' perspectives are often ignored because they conflict with the perspectives or ideals of white colleagues (Wilson et al., 2003). Racism persists through professional and institutional news structures, such as objectivity and neutrality, that have "reified a system of White supremacy" (Robinson & Culver, 2019, p. 378). Diversifying journalists will not change the institutional structures that protect white supremacy and white agendas in journalism (Byerly & Wilson, 2009); rather, changing institutional structures is the key to addressing race and racism in news and media more broadly.

Neoliberal Capitalism

Neoliberalism has been theorized as a political movement and policies that require the realignment of government to protect the interest of capital before the interests of the public (Bockman, 2013; Lipman, 2011; McChesney, 2001) or, a force of ideology and governance that "employs modes of governance, discipline, and regulation" (Giroux, 2013, p. 2) and creates a "new social order" (Duménil & Lévy, 2005, p. 9) to benefit of the ruling class of global capitalists through centering market logics (Bockman, 2013; Savage, 2018). Dr. Bettina Love (2019) characterized neoliberalism as the prevailing idea "that competition is good for the economy, that the free market will solve all of our financial and social problems, and that deregulation is best, regardless of how it impacts the environment or job safety" (p. 146).

Neoliberalism is a form of capitalism, not a separate economic system, a distinction that cannot be ignored in understanding how it functions (Campbell, 2005; Duggan, 2014; Kotz,

2015). Neoliberal capitalism uses the market to reorganize unequal wealth and class power to suppress the working class and benefit the transnational capitalist class (Clarke, 2005; Duménil & Lévy, 2005; Garland & Harper, 2012; Harvey, 2005). The following section provides a brief history of neoliberal capitalism, an outline of neoliberalism and its dimensions, and criticisms of neoliberal research.

Brief History of Neoliberal Capitalism

Neoliberal capitalism theory developed in the 1930s, and by the late 1970s the ideas began to be implemented globally (Bockman, 2013; Duggan, 2014). Economic ideas from a think tank led by Frederick von Hayden influenced George Stigler and Milton Friedman, key leaders of the University of Chicago School of Economics, who became the faces of neoliberal economic theory (Brown, 2005; Davies, 2014; Fitzner, 2017; Harvey, 2005; Steger & Roy, 2010). Members of the Chicago School were economic imperialists, deregulation proponents, and advocates of monetarism (Davies, 2014; Harvey, 2005; Steger & Roy, 2010).

Neoliberal capitalism is not a return to classic liberalism but a rejection of Keynesian capitalist economics (Clarke, 2005; Davies, 2014; Duggan, 2014). Classical liberal economics advocates for laissez-faire economics, free markets, free trade, competition, and limited government intervention (Brown, 2005; Clarke, 2005; MacEwan, 2005; Steger & Roy, 2010). Liberalism assumes that individuals act with rational self-interest through free exchange (Clarke, 2005; Steger & Roy, 2010). Classical liberalism views the free market as a reflection of morals and values; hard work and laziness translate into success and failure, respectively. However, the free markets of liberal capitalism resulted in more than moral failures by the 1920s and 1930s, when capitalism's endless cycle of production and profit resulted globally in exploited labor, wealth inequality, and high unemployment (Clarke, 2005).

Practiced in the United States from the 1940s until the late 1970s, Keynesian economics was an attempt to prevent pre-World War II global conditions that resulted from the crisis of capital and inadequacies of classic liberalism (Harvey, 2005). Also known as controlled capitalism (Steger & Roy, 2010), regulated capitalism (Kotz, 2015), or embedded liberalism (Harvey, 2005), Keynesian economics assumed that modern capitalism requires some regulation, such as restrictions on some capital, government ownership and regulation of some public goods, state intervention to stimulate the economy at times, and policies for labor and citizens' welfare (Campbell, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Kotz, 2015; Lipman, 2011; Steger & Roy, 2010). Instead of opposing regulation, Keynesian capitalism was "a systematic application of fiscal policy as a means of redistribution, and macroeconomic regulation to remedy the deficiencies of the market" (Clarke, 2005, p. 58).

This era of capitalist economic policy facilitated the U.S. post-World War II economic, technological, and industrial boom by supporting social welfare, government spending, and organized labor (Duménil & Lévy, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Lipman, 2011). Organized labor's increased voice and role in both business and government resulted in improved labor rights, collective bargaining, wage growth, and smaller profit margins (Harvey, 2005).[2]

A crisis of capital in the 1970s brought economic, political, and social disruptions, including increased unemployment, spiking inflation, and large corporate profit losses (Duménil & Lévy, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Steger & Roy, 2010). Falling profit margins resulted in chokeholds on union organizing, restrictive regulations on finance capital were eliminated or circumvented, and banks exploited loopholes for interest-rate ceilings and created unregulated services to

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[2] Although history books may remember Keynesian capitalism as a win for workers, it is still capitalism and perpetuated inequality, so the benefits fell mostly to unionized white men, not women, people of color, nonunionized workers, or people living in poverty (Lipman, 2011).

mirror regulated services (Campbell, 2005). Extended and broad government spending also resulted in uncontrolled inflation (Lipman, 2011).

Global political power shifted after two decades of failed U.S. intervention in Vietnam and the contemporaneous end of the Cold War in favor of capitalism and U.S. imperialism (Duménil & Lévy, 2005; Kotz, 2015). At the same time, domestic social uprisings from the student, worker, and Civil Rights movements challenged class power and social order (Garland & Harper, 2012; Lipman, 2011). In this volatile moment, neoliberal think tanks and institutions, which had been organizing after World War II, stepped up to direct U.S. economic policy toward free-market neoliberal capitalism (Davies, 2014; Harvey, 2005; Kotz, 2015; Lipman, 2011), and neoliberal policies became the governing policies of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States.

Defining Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism, or *neoliberal capitalism*, came into parlance in the 2000s referring to the economic models of the United States and United Kingdom (Duménil & Lévy, 2005; Kotz, 2015). Neoliberalism rejects government intervention, regulation, and the welfare state of Keynesian capitalism and promotes free trade and free markets as the best structure for society (Brown, 2005; Clarke, 2005; Duggan, 2014, Duménil & Lévy, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Lipman, 2011; Love, 2019; McCarthy et al., 2009; McChesney, 1999a; Ross & Gibson, 2006; Steger & Roy, 2010). For neoliberal capitalists, the market is "the organizing principle for all political, social, and economic decisions" (Giroux, 2004, p. 495) because the "market system assures optimal economic outcomes in every respect—efficiency, income distribution, economic growth, and technological progress—as well as securing individual liberty" (Kotz, 2015, p. 12).

Neoliberal capitalism is based on the assumption that the market provides individual choice while government regulation removes it (Kotz, 2015). Under this logic, the failure of controlled capitalism is blamed on government regulation, public spending, and tariffs on global trade, and the argument is made that these interventions must be abolished for the economy to function (McChesney, 1999a; Steger & Roy, 2010). Thus, the role of government shifts from protecting the citizenry to protecting the market.

Neoliberal capitalism proponents champion the idea of a deregulated, state-free market while simultaneously requiring government intervention to provide or protect pro-corporate benefits (Campbell, 2005; Duménil & Lévy, 2005; Fitzner, 2017; Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Lipman, 2011; MacEwan, 2005). The push for deregulation, or more accurately the reimagination of regulation, facilitates globalization and financialization of markets, two defining economic outcomes of neoliberal capitalism (Bockman, 2013; Duggan, 2014; Kotz, 2015).

Neoliberal capitalism is a response to improve profits, which decreased under controlled capitalism, by reorganizing the economy to benefit capital over labor (Hursh, 2006). Thus, neoliberalism moves wealth to the capitalist class through domestic and global financialization and maintains class inequality (Davies, 2014; Duggan, 2014; Duménil & Lévy, 2005; Fitzner, 2017; Garland & Harper, 2012; Harvey, 2005; McChesney, 1999a; Lipman, 2011). The model is "a cultural project of building consent for the upward redistribution of wealth and power" (Duggan, 2014, p. 181).

This redistribution is enabled by privatization, bringing a once-public good into the marketplace, reorganizing the structures of public goods so they act like markets, or ending the public nature of these goods altogether (Davies, 2014). Privatization expands commodification

by extending what can be commodified (Harvey, 2005). But Commodification and privatization can result in conflict when public and private interests clash over social goods and needs, such as school, healthcare, and the environment (Love, 2019; MacEwan, 2005). Privatization also has a depoliticizing and dedemocratizing effect as people lose decision-making power and political input when public goods become privatized (MacEwan, 2005). In other words, "Under neo-liberalism, everything is either for sale or is plundered for profit" (Giroux, 2004, p. 495).

Although neoliberalism appeared in U.S. policies in the late 1970s, President Ronald Reagan escalated neoliberal deregulation in the United States, weakening organized labor, outsourcing industry, and increasing monopolization (Harvey, 2005; McCarthy et al., 2009). However, despite its association with neoconservative politics, neoliberal capitalism has existed under both conservative and liberal U.S. governments, including Presidents Carter, Clinton, and Obama (Kotz, 2015; Ross & Gibson, 2006). Along with heads of state and government leaders, "global power elites" (Steger & Roy, 2010), including global corporate executives, lobbyists, media producers, celebrities, and other public figures, perpetuate discourse that legitimizes neoliberal capitalism. Thus, many of the acolytes of neoliberalism are members of the culture and information industries—journalists, publicists, popular writers, celebrities, and entertainers—who benefitted from and blossomed under neoliberal policies and financialization (Harvey, 2005).

Through marketization, individualism, income inequality, privatization, and bipartisan political support, neoliberal capitalism has effected major changes to the global and domestic economies and influenced the reorganization of public and private life.

Neoliberalism as Ideology

Neoliberalism can be understood as ideology, governmentality, and policy. The present study was focused on the ideological dimension of neoliberalism. (See Brown, 2005; Harvey, 2005; and Steger & Roy, 2010 for more on neoliberalism as governmentality and policy.) Neoliberal capitalism functions as the dominant ideology of global capitalism by changing values, relationships, and perceptions of reality (Flew, 2014; Kotz, 2015; Lipman, 2011; McChesney, 1999a). This system has become a global common sense (Ross & Gibson, 2006; Savage, 2018), a "monoculture" (Ross & Gibson, 2006, p. 2), supported by the refrain that there is no alternative to it (Kotz, 2015) as the destination of the evolution of capitalist societies (McChesney, 1999a; Lipman, 2011).

What makes neoliberal capitalism a cohesive and mutually reinforcing ideological system? First, neoliberal capitalism is an "economistic ideology," meaning that it centers the market and material goods "at the heart of the human experience" (Steger & Roy, 2011, p. 29). Neoliberalism perpetuates and reinforces the supremacy of the market across all areas of life (Bockman, 2013; Duggan, 2014; Duménil & Lévy, 2005; Fitzner, 2017; Garland & Harper, 2012; Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Kotz, 2015; McChesney, 1999a; Steger & Roy, 2010). The assumption that markets are more efficient and effective than government for supporting economic and social needs (Bockman, 2013; Lipman, 2011) reinforce the ~~economistic~~ goals of capital accumulation (Campbell, 2005; Harvey, 2005): deregulation, privatization and competition (Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005; MacEwan, 2005), and limited or no state intervention (Bockman, 2013; Campbell, 2005; Duggan, 2014; Duménil & Lévy, 2005; Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005; Lipman, 2011; MacEwan, 2005).

Competition and individualism also are central pieces of neoliberal ideology. The supremacy of the market results in the supremacy of competition (Davies, 2014). However, competition is only available to a few private interests to ensure their profit (McChesney, 1999a). As the market produces competition, competition produces individuals to compete. Individualism manifests ideas of freedom, individual choice, and personal property, fundamentally altering one's perception of self in relation to community by replacing collective responsibility with individual responsibility (Bockman, 2013; Garland & Harper, 2012; Harvey, 2005; Kotz, 2015; McCarthy et al., 2009; McChesney, 1999a; Lipman, 2011; Ross & Gibson, 2006). Individual responsibility is applied to all aspects of life, from the belief that all success or failure is personal (not systemic or institutional) to the justification and removal of social services (Giroux, 2004; Harvey, 2005).

This results in an atomized, "highly individualistic conception of human society" (Kotz, 2015, p. 11) in which community needs are not reflected, but freedoms "reflect the interest of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporates, and financial capital" (Harvey, 2005, p. 7). Neoliberal ideology transforms subjectivities, consciousness, and social identity. With the emphasis on market supremacy, competition, and individual responsibility, this ideology alters and dissolves social and community responsibilities, fundamentally shifting the relationship between people and their community (Hursh, 2006). This shift reinforces consumer identity among citizens, shifting away from a sense of self as a citizen with rights to an identity of a consumer with rights to economic power under neoliberal capitalism (Lipman, 2011), a "'thin' democracy" (Apple, 2006, p. 25) or "prepackaged democracy" (Macedo, 2009, p. 80).

Neoliberal ideology is strong and "owes its strength to its ideological appeal" (Clarke, 2005, p. 58). This strength and appeal may result from its evolution from early capitalism; in the

same way liberal capitalism threw off the oppression of feudalism, neoliberal capitalism is throwing off the oppression of the welfare state (Kotz, 2015). Neoliberal capitalism's power may come from "its saturation of social practices and consciousness, making it difficult to think otherwise" (Lipman, 2011, p. 6). At its core, neoliberal capitalism centers freedom, which appeals to people's core sense of self and may contribute to its acceptance as part of the prevailing logic of a society as a dominant ideology (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism became hegemonic in the United States (and globally) through the *construction of consent* at institutional and individual levels (Harvey, 2005). Illustrating Gramsci's (1971) notion of *common sense* (meaning the popular cultural practices, understandings, and traditions that are generally accepted within a society), "the ruling class was able to capture the dominant cultural and state institutions and thus impose their ideas on popular consent" (Flew, 2014).

Institutional consent was constructed through think tanks and institutes that influenced corporate and social institutions and political parties, thereby gaining state power. U.S. business owners who stood to benefit from class restructuring exploited 1970s campaign finance reforms and invested in the Republican Party. At micro levels, consent was constructed through the rhetoric of individual freedom, exploiting differences among social justice movements and situating state intervention as an imposition on personal freedom. Neoliberal advocates also marketed individual freedom to the white conservative Christian voter base through traditional values and morality while exploiting racism, misogyny, and homophobia within this group. Thus, neoliberalism moved from economic theory to cultural ideology through democratic mechanisms, such as elections, into state policy (Harvey, 2005).

The effects of neoliberalism on political rationality impact citizens at both macro and micro levels. Neoliberal rationality leaks across all aspects of life, which are then filtered through

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an economic lens. Systems and structures are changed to reflect economic rationality, including laws, policy, social institutions, and government, in service to the free market (Brown, 2005). Neoliberal states replicate neoliberal ideology through social institutions (Davies, 2014), and the model is reinforced as both political and normative (Clarke, 2005).

Criticisms

Neoliberal capitalism has been criticized as an economic system; however, its theorization and application also have been criticized. One critique is that neoliberalism lacks a consistent definition, leaving *neoliberalism* essentially meaningless. Different definitions, interpretations, and applications allegedly result in amorphous and contradictory conceptualizations that leave the concept too broad and "academically unwieldy" to be useful (Venugopal, 2015, p. 170). For example, Flew (2014) identified six theorizations of neoliberalism in the literature that differed within and across disciplines, ranging from an atheoretical catch-all to Foucauldian governmentality.

In her book, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, Brown (2019) suggested that the contemporary use of neoliberalism may no longer adequately describe the current political-economic milieu. She stated that neoliberalism was built on the need to protect markets from fascism and to keep markets separate from politics, so the original neoliberalists may not accept the deep influence industries have over politics in the current "Frankensteining creation" (Brown, 2019, p. 10) or even consider the present economic system neoliberal capitalism at all.

Garland and Harper (2012) argued that critiques of neoliberalism do not address the root of the problem: capitalism. They reported a shift among academics in the 1990s from critiquing capitalism to critiquing the effects of neoliberalism on democracy, signaling a complicit

acceptance of capitalism as the prevailing economic system. Garland and Harper suggested that the term *neoliberalism* is replacing the term *capitalism*, normalizing capitalism by only focusing on its late-stage form. Another critique of neoliberal research has been that democracy is not the solution to neoliberalism because "liberal democracy, far from negating neoliberalism, constitutes its very conditions of possibility" (Dean, as cited in Garland & Harper, 2012) and even enables it with depoliticized and politically inactive citizens (McChesney, 1999a; Ross & Gibson, 2006). Thus, the focus should not be on democracy as a solution to neoliberalism but on neoliberalism's dissolution of meaningful democracy.

Neoliberalism and Education

The effects of neoliberal capitalism are not only economic but pedagogical (Giroux, 2013). Education's reproductive function teaches the norms and values that correspond to capitalism's goals and prepares students to join the exploitable workforce a capitalist economy requires (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 2004; Ross & Gibson, 2006). This occurs through lessons in the standard curriculum and those in the *hidden curriculum*, the informal lessons of norms, values, and beliefs that occur during curricular instruction (Giroux & Penna, 1979). Through schooling, neoliberal ideology can "train workers for service sector jobs and produce life-long consumers" (Giroux, 2004, p. 495), thereby producing the necessary producers and consumers for capitalism and legitimating and justifying the supremacy of the market in social life (Apple, 2004, 2006; Giroux, 2004).

The United States has balanced education as a private good serving the labor market and as a public good supporting democratic participation (Labaree, 1997); however, neoliberal policies reinforce education as a private good and establish production of a capitalism-receptive workforce as education's central purpose (Apple, 2006; Fitzner, 2017; Lipman, 2011). In

neoliberal capitalism, discourses of neutrality are used to claim that educational policies, practices, and structures are apolitical while obscuring the role of schooling for "economic and cultural reproduction" (Apple, 2004, p. 144). Widely accepted as the beginning of neoliberal reform in U.S. education, the *A Nation at Risk* report (National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983) used a fear-based approach to suggest that inadequate education allowed other countries to challenge U.S. economic and military global supremacy; the authors then provided market-based solutions for this manufactured crisis (Brass, 2014; Hursh, 2006; Noblit & Green, 2015).

Neoliberal educational reforms serve two purposes. First, they scapegoat education as the reason for economic inequality while deflecting attention from macroeconomic policies that underlie neoliberalism; second, they appear to be fixing these issues through policy and reform while further embedding neoliberal policies into education and its structures (Hursh, 2006). These neoliberal educational policies shape how we understand society and social relations (Apple, 2006; Lipman, 2011). They also have left American youth facing economic uncertainty, underemployment, massive student debt, climate crises, politically neutered curriculum, political ignorance, and nonparticipation (Fitzner, 2017) and teachers facing perpetual overwork (Apple, 2009).

The main interests of neoliberal capitalism are to ensure that schooling supports capital accumulation, educational markets, and privatization, so neoliberal capitalist policy and reforms work to make education function as a market and reflect socioeconomic divisions (Apple, 2006; Behrent, 2012; Lipman, 2011; McCarthy et al., 2009). This can occur by focusing on standards and accountability in education that reflect capitalist and corporate interests (Brass, 2014), using liberal ideals of fairness and equity in educational rhetoric (Hursh, 2006), and emphasizing

competition, individualism, and external rewards (Behrent, 2012). The influence of special interest groups and advocates on education also is a hallmark of the neoliberal state (Harvey, 2005). As school funding decreases, education is treated as an investment opportunity for those with access to capital (e.g., venture philanthropists, foundations, think tanks, corporate leaders, industry leaders, edu-businesses, and entrepreneurs) who influence the decisions and initiatives driving educational policy and curriculum for their own benefit (Brass, 2014; de Saxe et al., 2020; Giroux, 2013; Hursh, 2006, Lipman, 2011).

The corporatization of education occurs at economic and cultural levels (Rexhepi & Torres, 2011; Saltman, 2009) and includes educational commodification, privatization, and marketization (Ross & Gibson, 2006; Savage, 2018). Neoliberal creep is also evident in measurable accountability through standards, tracking, and assessment (Casey et al., 2013; Ross & Gibson, 2006). These methods of measuring success reinforce a positivist approach to understanding social phenomena and justify neoliberal ideals of meritocracy, competition, and rugged individualism (de Saxe et al., 2020; Rexhepi & Torres, 2011).

Neoliberalism's reorganization of education can be summarized in three areas of change: (a) vocationalization, in which education is conceptualized as a commodity with its purpose bound to economic returns; (b) fiscalization, in which budgets become the determining factor in educational programming and departmental existence; and (c) virtualization, in which schooling is increasingly moved into and dependent on online environments (Cantor & Courant, 2003; McCarthy et al., 2009). Although some researchers explain these effects of neoliberal influences on educational organization as economic issues (Cantor & Courant; 2003) and others explain them as cultural issues (McCarthy et al., 2009), they ultimately function in both areas; by changing the economics of schooling, the culture of schooling changes, and vice versa.

Public education suffers under neoliberalism (McChesney, 1999a; Savage, 2018). Reforms are intended to create change; thus, neoliberal reforms in education are intended to reshape the goals and roles of school and education. Ultimately, these changes effected by the influence of neoliberal capitalism on education result in a loss of the public sphere and democracy in schooling (Saltman, 2009).

Connecting the Dots

This section draws together racism, neoliberalism, and media and news literacy education by addressing how racism and neoliberalism function together, tying together racism and neoliberalism in education more broadly, and addressing MLE specifically.

Racism and Neoliberal Capitalism

White supremacy and neoliberal capitalism are two enduring systems of oppression in the United States; their interdependence makes them "the conjoined twins" (Kendi, 2019, p. 157). Capitalism employs racism as a means to justify its ends, and racism relies on capitalism to manifest its worldview (Oluo, 2018). To understand neoliberal capitalism in the United States, race must be incorporated (Hamilton, 2020) because "in our neoliberal world, antiracism is the exception rather than the rule" (Enck-Wanzer, 2011, p. 25).

Neoliberal ideology advocates for a post-racial world, which is reflected in U.S. efforts to divorce racism from capitalism in historical memory and record (Melamed, 2006; Shafer, 2017). Post-racialism is performed through the use of *colorblind language*, a discourse that erases racialized differences by interpreting any discussion of race as outdated and racist; it demands *antiracialism*, meaning the ignoring of race, instead of *antiracism*, the acknowledgment of the history and context of race (Enck-Wanzer, 2011).

Both neoliberal capitalism and colorblind racism in the United States use the liberal ideals of objectivity, neutrality, and meritocracy to indicate fairness and success while simultaneously obscuring the ways social, political, and economic structures affect life for people with different social identities. The myth of meritocracy legitimizes inequality as a result of personal or individual choices and behaviors. The myth of the free market also helps to justify colorblindness and meritocracy, hiding the disadvantages built into the system for racialized groups. Colorblindness, alongside the other hallmarks of neoliberal ideology such as individualism and liberal economics, is used to judge worth and justify racism against racialized groups and poor peoples (Hamilton & Strickland, 2020).

Universalizing and individualizing enable systemic problems to be understood as individual problems. The core assumption is that everyone operates under the same conditions and has personal responsibility, which allows outcomes of systemic problems to be read as the responsibility of individuals (Hamilton, 2020). In terms of neoliberal capitalism, individualism hides class membership as a determining factor in individual success (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). In terms of race, individualism allows achievements and failures to be interpreted as meritocratic outcomes while obscuring advantages and disadvantages resulting from systemic and institutional racial inequality (Shafer, 2017). In material terms, neoliberal politicians and economists promise benefits to everyone through trickle-down policies, yet Black Americans have experienced economic stagnation or regression in earning power, wealth accumulation, employment rates and increases in mass incarceration (Hamilton, 2020, n.p.).

Meritocracy and colorblindness function in tandem to uphold white supremacy and economic inequality (Hamilton, 2020), as is evident in the coded racism used to support neoliberal policies and measures. The neoliberal ideology surrounding public and private

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ownership situates private goods as a symbol of success that is silently equated with whiteness, whereas public goods are equated with poverty and communities of color (Hill Collins, 2009; Lipman, 2011). Under neoliberal capitalism, the need for state welfare is a personal failure, not a result of systemic inequality, making the need for welfare a justifiable reason to eliminate welfare (Lipman, 2011). Because the connection between racialized groups and poverty is obscured by the colorblind rhetoric of individualism and meritocracy, the racist underpinnings of cutting public services and defunding public goods remain hidden. Colorblind racism asks us to see people, not color, meaning individuals are held responsible without consideration of the social and structural barriers they face based on their demographic characteristics. Making the market the judge means that individuals become the unit of measurement, not systems and structures, which protects white supremacy and class inequality (Hamilton & Strickland, 2020).

Neoliberal capitalism functions as a tool of white supremacy to limit economic gains for racialized people. Hamilton and Strickland (2020) called this *strategic racism*, in that the white working class prioritizes racial identity over class identity, ensuring racial supremacy while leaving the economic hierarchy undisturbed. Neoliberalism gained political support in the 1970s as white middle-class families felt economic and social uncertainty in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, equity and inclusion policies, and immigration (Brown, 2019). Since the 1970s and alongside the integration and eventual dominance of neoliberal policy and ideology in the United States, racialized communities have faced increasing economic and social precarity. Before neoliberal capitalism, racism ensured that Black Americans were economically disenfranchised, even during periods of economic stimulus and labor growth (Hamilton & Strickland, 2020); neoliberalism continues the white supremacy project that the United States started over 400 years ago.

Racism and Neoliberal Capitalism in Education

Before addressing why racism and neoliberal capitalism must be examined in MLE, the interplay of racism and neoliberal capitalism in schooling must be considered. Both neoliberal capitalism and racism are symbiotic systems of oppression. That is, they are interdependent. Thus, to interrogate economic systems, racism must be considered, and for racism to be examined, neoliberal capitalism must be included.

Education policies and practices are social constructions and representations of value and power within a certain context, such as a country, state, school, or organization (Lipman, 2011). Racist and neoliberal educational policies and reforms result in educational inequity (Dixon, 2018; Hursh, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) that enables the racial scripts and narratives that justify the carceral state (Giroux, 2013; Jones, 2012). The embedment of racism and neoliberal capitalism can be found in the ideology, history, and processes of curricula. For example, *classroom management*, or the practice of controlling and maintaining acceptable classroom behaviors and processes, is a central idea in the neoliberal U.S. classroom and is historically rooted in management of human capital during slavery, which was later integrated into Taylorist factory-based efficiency measures applied to early public schooling to prepare students for a racialized labor market (Casey et al., 2013). Considering the high stakes that directly influence the material conditions for racialized students, deconstructing the decisions and policies of education is imperative, particularly for aspects of education such as MLE that purport to benefit democracy.

These twin systems of oppression function together to reinforce inequality, particularly among racialized communities. This is especially important when considering educational reformers, nonprofits, and other organizations that provide support, materials, and curricula that

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circumvent local community control. As parts of the "neoliberal machine" (Love, 2019, p. 144), corporate reformers and philanthropists disrupt locally controlled public education through "financial support for the business/corporate elite's version of what Black education should be" (Jones, 2012, p. 69). Thus, racism and neoliberal capitalism work together through education to reinforce the neoliberal ideology necessary to maintain systemic racial inequality.

MLE in Racial Neoliberal Education

The role of media and media education must be considered within the current racial neoliberal system of education. Through educational structures, policies, and practices, neoliberal and racist ideologies are mutually constitutive. Racism enables and perpetuates conditions for neoliberal capitalism to thrive, and vice versa. Adding media to the mix requires the acknowledgment that "the critical problem with the media and cultural industries is not simply that their character is determined by market forces, but that they represent the interest of a ruling class" (Garland & Harper, 2012, p. 415). The literature provides evidence that the interest of the ruling class is to maintain inequality through economic and racial oppression.

Media help people understand the world. One theory of how this occurs is through *public pedagogy*, an educative force that exists within and outside formal education through culture, specifically advertising, corporate media, government propaganda, and the internet (Giroux, 2004). The internet makes public pedagogy's neoliberal ideologies effectively inescapable and, therefore, hegemonic.

The implications of public pedagogy are seen in the neoliberal capitalist model in news media, resulting from corporate ownership and consolidation and contributing to increases in partisan news (Marinov, 2020). However, despite the increase in partisan news, corporate journalism continues to embrace the ideals of objectivity and neutrality. This embrace of

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objectivity began with a positivist approach to objectivity that intended to reflect truth, then

shifted to objectivity as a skeptical approach for analyzing new information, and now, in the

current media environment, objectivity is achieved through a "balance of perspectives"

(Marinov, 2020, p. 4). The onus for determining whether a news story is "biased" or "objective"

is then placed on the neoliberal audience—the "'responsible,' 'rational' news media consumer"

(Marinov, 2020, p 10)—who must sort through information and independently determine what is

legitimate or true. This form of public pedagogy is "privatizing and internalizing both

responsibility and blame" to the news reader (Marinov, 2020, p. 9).

Apple's (1998) analysis of Channel One, a (now defunct) commercial television news

program of daily in-school advertising targeted at student audiences in exchange for free

television equipment, also illustrates how public pedagogy can infiltrate educational spaces.

Apple's political economic analysis examined the social totality in which Channel One existed: a

post-Reagan era of educational reform that positioned education as an economic cost, demanded

market-based accountability measures in schools, increased tax breaks for companies (which

effectively defunded schools), and encouraged business-school programming partnerships. In his

analysis, Apple linked neoliberal economic reform to economic justifications that shifted the

goals of education to the economy, not democracy, and that situated students as consumers, not

citizens. Although Channel One is no longer running, until 2018 it was still providing

commercial news programming to classrooms, and its media literacy lessons are still available

online.

In addition to the inescapable public pedagogy of corporate interests, democratic

participation is challenged by a lack of civics education, compounded by low media literacy

levels and limited problem-solving skills, which leads to "the civic empowerment gap"

(Levinson, 2010), wherein Black and Brown children do not receive from formal schooling the skills needed for full participation in a democratic society (Love, 2019). Instead, students are taught civic compliance, which fails to challenge economic and racial systemic inequality (Love, 2019). Advocates of civics-focused MLE acknowledge that teaching values is a central part of any civics-focused pedagogy, challenging the current norms of media education that prioritize inquiry based on "critical distance, transactionality, deficit-focus, content orientation, and individual responsibility" (Mihailidis, 2019, p. 174) and reflect the liberal and positivist epistemology that underlies neoliberal capitalism and is used to justify white supremacy. Love (2019) highlighted low media literacy levels as a variable in the civic empowerment gap equation; therefore, improvements in MLE, with specific attention to race and economics, should help to close this gap.

Critiques of Racism and Neoliberalism in MLE

Efforts among scholars to use CRT in media literacy are growing, as evidenced by the increasing amount of attention and research dedicated to critical race media literacy. (See volume 22, number 2 of the *International Journal of Multicultural Education* for examples.) These efforts seek to expand critical media literacy beyond general attention to issues of power in media (Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007a, 2007b) to focus specifically on race and racism in media in education (Yosso, 2002, 2020). One argument supporting a critical race media literacy is that although critical media literacy may address racism, it lacks the language to do so effectively, which a CRT framework could provide (King, 2017). Nearly 20 years after proposing that media education needs to consider race (Yosso, 2002), Yosso (2020) maintained that a critical race media literacy is still needed to identify racialized imagery, question historical and contextual racial scripts in media, and challenge majoritarian narratives perpetuated through media.

Of particular interest is a study in which CRT was used to examine structural racism in journalism education. By using a composite narrative from instructional materials about journalistic objectivity, student newspaper articles, and observations, Alemán (2017) applied CRT to examine the conflict between objectivity's role as a professional standard of journalism and its force as a master narrative that reinforces white privilege, concluding that white privilege allows white Americans to function as the default American, and "reporters who are forced to write in these seemingly objective ways perpetuate this idea, too" (p. 83). She added that this pursuit of objectivity by and through professional journalism can cause further decontextualization of sources if relationships of power are not addressed.

Efforts to address neoliberal capitalism in MLE are found in critiques of commercialism in education. Older studies show a history of corporate curricula that allowed companies to build positive public relations and promote pro-corporation ideals that naturalized their economic dominance and prepared a labor force (e.g., Harty, 1979; Molnar, 1996). Higdon and Butler (2021) found that these outcomes continue to occur in corporate media education curricula today. Corporate media literacy curricula fail to define media literacy but foreground marketable career skills as a central outcome, emphasize online corporate platforms as community spaces for civic participation, focus on reducing mediated harm, and fail to incorporate audience identity or cultural relevance, resulting in a narrow, acritical approach to digital media literacy support for corporate and capitalist goals (Higdon et al., 2021). These findings are essential to understand because media technology companies in the media literacy curriculum game, namely Facebook (2021) and Google (n.d.), have economic interests in controlling the narratives and skills surrounding media use and criticism and massive interests in the big data and analytics that come from users. This is evidenced by the list of media tech companies that fund NAMLE, including

Amazon Studios, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2021a).

Marmol (2018) tied together the simultaneous necessity and challenge of critiquing neoliberal capitalism and racism in corporate news media in CMLE. He posited that the public pedagogy functions of corporate news (including public news media) "reproduce and reinforce the culture-ideology of neoliberalism and the class and racial divisions that allow the politico-economic system to flourish" (p. 25). Corporate news media choices for stories and representations of classed and racialized groups result in the stereotypes required for neoliberalism to maintain its hegemonic dominance. Marmol proposed a critical approach to MLE that addresses neoliberalism and racism and implements alternative media and critical questioning.

CMLE and ecomedia literacy inherently incorporate critiques of capitalism and racism: CMLE in its questions of power and ownership, and ecomedia literacy through its questions of production and consumption that are built into the colonizing logic of capitalism and exacerbate the climate crisis (Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; López, 2019, 2020; Share, 2015). Educator networks, such as the Action Coalition for Media Education and the Critical Media Project, connect teachers and students with resources, language, events, and conferences for broad critical engagement with media, including critiques of capitalism, class, and race. Educational resource producers, such as the Media Education Foundation, produce films and viewing guides for institutional use. Although these films are valuable, they may be cost prohibitive for smaller organizations such as public schools or libraries. A lower-cost alternative, Project Censored from the Media Freedom Foundation, is a praxis-based critical news literacy project that supports students in analyzing corporate media and creating their own news to cover

what corporate coverage has ignored. Such programs and projects reflect critiques of the racial and economic systems of corporate media *and* the content produced within these confining structures.

Overall, critical analysis of race and neoliberal capitalism is possible in MLE. However, much work is needed in this area. Specifically, further study is needed on how ideologies of racism and neoliberalism may be perpetuated or reified to a general student population through news literacy education. Education and media are institutions that can reinforce the needs of the ruling class through ideology, as is evident in both education (Giroux, 2004; Lipman, 2011) and commercial news and media (Brown, 2005; Fenton, 2011). Thus, the ruling class currently benefits from neoliberalism and white supremacy. The resulting depoliticization erodes democratic institutions and alienates people from their roles as citizens, which threatens democracy.

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Identifying the Gaps

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Despite the research done in media literacy, race, and neoliberalism, gaps for inquiry remain. This section addresses the arguments surrounding media literacy as a necessary tool for democratic societies, with a review of three perspectives on the antidemocratic nature of media literacy and an outline of why analyzing race and neoliberal capitalism in MLE matters.

Democracy at the Core of Media Literacy

The idea that media literacy is necessary for democracy is foundational, tracing back to Masterman (1985), who asserted that being media literate is essential for citizens to participate in and maintain a healthy democracy. Media literacy educators and scholars drafted foundational principles for MLE in 1992, naming media literacy as a central component of a functioning democracy and necessary for all citizens' full participation (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993;

Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Although this declaration did not unify the field, it provided a point

from which MLE scholars and practitioners could orient their approaches, and it identified media

literacy as an essential part of modern democratic society (Gaines, 2010; Hobbs, 2011b; Lewis &

Jhally, 1998).

Those who take a protectionist approach to news and media literacy have acknowledged

its central connections to democratic participation (Ashley, 2019; Ashley et al., 2013; Fleming,

2014; Moeller, 2012). And studies have shown that media literacy can positively affect and

increase youths' online civic and political participation (Kahne et al., 2012). Although

empowerment approaches make civic and democratic participation a tenet of MLE, CMLE

scholars make radical democracy a central pursuit (Kellner & Share, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009),

drawing clear connections between politics and culture (Leistyna & Alper, 2007). Because

digital media literacy is needed to be an engaged citizen in today's world of digital media and

global capitalism (Kellner & Share, 2009; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013), CMLE may be able to

provide tools for citizens to address the paradox that media technologies can be powerful

democratizing forces while simultaneously acting as tools of domination by advancing

hegemonic and dominant ideologies (Kellner & Share, 2009; Torres & Mercado, 2007). Media

literacy as democratic pedagogy supports teachers and students in practicing critique,

participation, and collaboration; in reclaiming the liberatory potential of media technology; and

in practicing critical solidarity (Kellner & Share, 2009).

Media Literacy: Antidemocratic Failure?

Some critics have argued that media literacy does not necessarily support civic

engagement or democracy and that the assumption that media literacy is inherently related to

public or civic engagement or that being media literate results in democratic orientations may be

an error. One media education researcher based in the United Kingdom wrote that formal media education, meaning classroom-based instruction, is often nonpartisan. This results in a "neoliberal double bind" (McDougall, 2017, p. 24): media education teaches critical theory without praxis to maintain apoliticality or avoids critical analysis in favor of self-representation that becomes reductive without language or theory in which to anchor one's interests (McDougall, 2017). McDougall suggested that media education in formal schooling is unlikely to benefit civic engagement, but media education in *third spaces*, meaning it exists outside the classroom, may be more successful because it can take a clear (often leftist) political position.

Another vocal critical, danah boyd, is a researcher at Microsoft Research and founder and president of the Data & Society Research Institute. Her SXSW EDU keynote "What Hath We Wrought?" centered on social media and fake news. boyd (2018) suggested that media literacy does the opposite of what educators want it to. She proposed that a "perverted version of media literacy does already exist" (n.p.), and it has the potential to increase and inflame current issues of distrust in institutions, including media and information. She argued this is because MLE asks people to doubt what they see and trust without providing support to make sense of what is uncovered by that doubt or skepticism (boyd, 2017, 2018): "It's up to each of us as individuals to decide for ourselves whether or not what we're getting is true" (boyd, 2018, n.p.). Here, she unintentionally critiqued neoliberalism in MLE, in which the onus is put on the individual. She also suggested that media literacy does not account for alternative ways of knowing (boyd, 2017), specifically that media literacy does not welcome conservative perspectives that view education, science, and media as unethical or unreliable institutions. (Although boyd attended to partisan politics in this point, her critique of MLE's epistemology was also, possibly unintentionally, an acknowledgement of colonialism.) boyd also stated that media literacy

advocates for a liberal, elitist, science-based approach to understanding truth and concluded that these failures cannot address the deep political polarization in the United States and ultimately enable environments for conspiracy theories and radicalization.

A third notable criticism was proposed by Druick (2016), who wrote that media literacy inherently supports neoliberal capitalism despite being sold as a tool to work for democracy. Druick drew from Graff's (1979, 1985) work on the myth of literacy, which situates literacy as an almost mystical concept with "panacea-like qualities" (Druick, 2016, p. 1128) that will uplift and improve individuals and society. Druick suggested that this myth of literacy applies to American media literacy because it has been treated similarly, with a presumption that media literacy is good for individuals, society, and democracy because it extends the boundaries of traditional literacy. She argued that American media literacy also rests on the presumption that media illiteracy is dangerous, which is tied to colonialism and racism through historical assumptions of modernity and literacy's integral role in modernizing. These historical assumptions still implicit in today's understanding of literacy reinforce class and race divisions and hierarchies based on who is and who is not literate according to ruling class standards. Druick suggested that the Birmingham School in the 1960s and 1970s was meaningfully connecting critical analyses of media through education projects. But these critiques of media based on social issues and political economy were eventually defanged upon integration into mainstream public education. She cited the core principles of the Center for Media Literacy as examples. It was in this shift from media studies to media literacy that neoliberal ideologies shaped the project "as the ideal technique for managing youth, connecting their relationship as consumers of media with the need for them to be formed into compliant yet entrepreneurial citizens" (Druick, 2016, p. 1135).

Despite their different theoretical and rhetorical routes, McDougall, boyd, and Druick share a common critique: media literacy and MLE reflect and reinforce neoliberal ideology despite being touted as tools of democratic citizenship. Although these critiques predominantly reflect neoliberal capitalism, they incorporate issues of race and racism because racism and capitalism are codependent and inseparable. Therefore, explicit in Druick's analysis and implicit in the analyses of McDougall and boyd is the assumption that media literacy and its goal of modernization and positivism reinforce colonialism and racism. These critiques are a point of departure for the present study, which addressed the essential question: What does it mean for democracy when media literacy, a tool intended to bring about democratic ends, ultimately reinforces antidemocratic systems of oppression?

Research Questions

The Common Core State Standards set an expectation for MLE to be infused into public school curricula without explicitly referring to MLE (Gorlewski & Garland, 2012; Meehan et al., 2015; Share, 2015). Some states have already implemented their own MLE requirements, and the legislative bodies in other states are working to include issues of digital citizenship and privacy in their state standards and curricular requirements (McNeill, 2022). Considering that education and schooling are inextricably connected to other institutions as systems of power and part of the social structure (Apple & Beyer, 1983), what does it mean for democracy when MLE is mandated in compulsory public education?

A driving question guided the present study: How does MLE challenge or reinforce neoliberal and racist ideologies, and what are the subsequent implications for democracy? This research used a case study of the News Literacy Project (NLP), one of the largest media literacy nonprofit educational organizations in the United States. Founded in 2008 by journalist Alan C.

Miller through a John S. and James L. Knight Foundation grant, NLP is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization that focuses on news literacy and emphasizes the standards of professional journalism, the First Amendment, and the problem of fake news. NLP's goal is to get news literacy into every middle and high school classroom (News Literacy Project, 2021e). NLP has produced a variety of educational tools for both educators and students through online curricula, professional development, newsletters, and access to professional journalists. This research examined NLP's political economic structure and the curricular resources it has produced and distributed and how neoliberal and racist ideologies are (or are not) present in these MLE resources.

Why does this matter? Critics like boyd have charged media literacy with being ideologically progressive, but is it? This research investigated this claim by analyzing if and how ideologies of neoliberal capitalism and racism manifest in NLP's curriculum. Conversely, media literacy scholars have argued that media literacy is necessary for an informed citizenry and healthy democracy (e.g., Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Kellner & Share, 2005; Masterman, 1985). What does it mean if the tools intended to promote a healthy, informed democracy (specifically MLE) reinforce economic and racial oppression?

If media literacy is about critical thinking and making "informed choices" (Hobbs, 2011b, p. 428), then MLE tools and the ideologies on which they are built should be scrutinized. Only by understanding the logics built into media literacy resources can their influence on critical thinking and informed choices be understood. This type of analysis is increasingly important as media literacy is mandated for inclusion in schools. And as more legislation requires advisory panels and experts to create curricular resources, the mainstream media literacy organizations and their orientations must be understood clearly because their staff may sit on

boards and build curricula for states, or their curricula may be imported directly for use. In addition to NLP, a variety of organizations develop and disseminate resources, including Common Sense, MediaWise, MediaSmarts, and Cyberwise. The present research can be a starting point to better understand how mainstream media literacy organizations engage with neoliberal capitalist and racist ideologies in their resources. Because one of the great debates about media literacy is the role of corporations in supporting media literacy initiatives (Hobbs, 1998), political economic and curriculum analyses of this organization will contribute to this longstanding and divisive debate.

Based on the review of the literature, its connections, and its gaps, four research questions were developed.

RQ$_1$: What is the News Literacy Project's political economic structure? This question acknowledges that media literacy organizations, including NLP, do not exist within a vacuum. Thus, understanding the power and economics of an organization helps to illuminate its relationship to the larger media and educational spheres and may provide insight into curricular choices.

RQ$_2$: How and in what ways does the News Literacy Project's news literacy curriculum challenge and reinforce neoliberal capitalism?

RQ$_3$: How and in what ways does the News Literacy Project's news literacy curriculum challenge and reinforce racism?

These questions acknowledge that individuals in organizations construct MLE and, therefore, MLE is not value free and may perpetuate dominant ideologies. Simultaneously, these questions acknowledge that, despite working within a specific political economic system, organizations can reject dominant ideologies. The answers to these research questions can clarify whether and

how NLP incorporates or rejects prevailing economic and racial logics, acknowledging the possibility for concurrent acceptance and rejection of neoliberal ideology and racist ideology.

RQ$_4$: In what ways does corporate support (both financial and nonfinancial) affect

nonprofit news literacy education at the News Literacy Project?

This question addresses the longstanding and unresolved "great debate" in media literacy research about the relationships and roles corporations have in the production of media literacy materials.

Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the literature for the major concepts addressed in the present study. Media literacy and MLE were defined as these terms are used throughout this dissertation. A historical trajectory of media literacy in the United States was presented, the three main theoretical approaches to MLE in the United States were outlined, and some critiques of media literacy were introduced. News literacy was then defined as a narrower area within the broader field of media literacy; this area accurately represents NLP, which was introduced as the case used in this study. Democracy was identified as a central goal of media literacy and MLE, and three criticisms of media literacy's democratic outcomes were discussed.

Next, an overview of race and racism in the United States was presented with emphasis on the social institutions of education and media. Race and racism were defined as these terms are used throughout this dissertation, and brief histories of U.S. education for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian peoples were provided. Educational reforms in the desegregation era that perpetuated racism in U.S. education were outlined and connected to current racialized problems in U.S. education. Then, racism in news and media was contextualized by introducing mediated stereotyping; examining how racism occurs in media industries through technology, economics, ownership, and

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policy; identifying how racialized groups have resisted racism in media; and discussing diversity in the news industry.

The final core concept for this research was neoliberal capitalism. A brief history of neoliberal capitalism was outlined, beginning with its conceptualization and ending with its application in the United States. Neoliberalism was discussed as an ideology, along with some criticism surrounding the theorization and conceptualization of this type of capitalism. This section concluded by explaining how neoliberal capitalism is evident in education.

The next two sections addressed the ways these core theoretical constructs are connected by unpacking how racism and neoliberal capitalism function symbiotically and introduced the idea of racialized capitalism. This interdependent relationship was then applied to explain how racism and neoliberal capitalism together impact education. The chapter explored the relationship between democracy and media literacy, namely regarding the assumption that media literacy is intended to support democracy via an engaged and critical citizenry. Criticism levied against this assumption about media literacy was addressed, which suggested that media literacy may in fact not benefit democracy, despite the best intentions of scholars, activists, and educators. These research gaps informed the four research questions about NLP to better understand how ideologies of race and capitalism are perpetuated and challenged in one of the largest (and corporately supported) mainstream news media literacy education organizations in the United States. This review of the literature provided the background, relevant research, relationships, and research questions essential to this study.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Understanding theory does not mean you live an oppressive life. It means you
have a deep understanding of oppression and how it works structurally.
—Bettina L. Love, Ph.D., *We Want to Do More Than Survive:*
Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom

Introduction

This research explored the implicit and explicit neoliberal capitalist and racist ideologies

in the structure and organization of NLP. To do so, this research built a critical political economy

of NLP and critically analyzed its curriculum through the lenses of CRT and neo-Marxist

curriculum theory. Multiple theoretical approaches were used in this study to analyze data and

answer the research questions. Critical theory broadly informs CPEoC, curriculum theory, and

CRT. The chapter outlines these theories and concludes with an explanation of how these

theoretical frames work together in the research.

Critical Theory

Critical theory provides a framework for understanding society by critiquing social and

cultural power structures to improve social and cultural conditions, not merely explain them.

This approach aids in understanding how social problems operate in social institutions and

constructions, such as ideology, politics, and culture (Anyon, 2011; Apple, 2001; Carspecken,

2019; Held, 1980; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Torres, 1999). Critical theorists accept that

social problems are complex and critiquing them requires understanding the social totality—

including historical, political, social, and cultural contexts (Kellner, 1989). In other words,

contextualizing social life is necessary in critical analysis since because social phenomena cannot

exist outside of their historical and material circumstances (Kellner, 1989).

Critical theories also address conflict, oppression, and subjugation with the goal of social change and liberation (Carspecken, 2019; Horkheimer, 1972; Kellner, 1989; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Torres, 1999). Unlike traditional social theories that take a neutral approach, critical theories enable researchers to critique power structures that oppress people, imagine new social relations, and engage in praxis. However, critical theories are not unified; no singular definition, framework, or method exists for the critical tradition, and approaches to critical theory are multiple, negotiable, general, and debated (Carspecken, 2019; Kellner, 1989; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Torres, 1999). Critical theory via the Frankfurt School, Louis Althusser, and Antonio Gramsci, which are draw from Marxist theory, informed th.

Marx's (1859/1904) model of base and superstructure offers a mechanism for understanding modern industrial society. This model posits that the economic mode of production (base) influences the political and cultural relations (superstructure) of a society. In this model, each part can affect the other, but the base exerts more influence over the superstructure. Although much theoretical discussion and elaboration has occurred, Marx's historical materialism posits that the class that controls material production and labor also controls mental production and shapes the ideas of a society to directly benefit the ruling class. The ideas and values of a society cannot spring forth without a ruling class and cannot be divorced from this relationship, making the values of a society inherently historical and political (Marx & Engels, 1932/1976).

Critical theory emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in Europe in response to failed revolutions and burgeoning fascism (Held, 1980; Kellner, 1989; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). In its reliance on the economy as the explanatory mechanism of social life, Marxism failed to account for how other social and cultural entities influence society. Thus, classical Marxism

could not fully explain the sociopolitical conditions at the time, so scholars sought new ways to engage psychological aspects, such as beliefs and values, to theorize social consciousness (Kellner, 1989). Through this shift, critical theory pushed beyond an economistic approach toward understanding the connection between the base and superstructure (Kellner, 1989; Knopp, 2012). The following section outlines broadly shared tenets of critical theory.

Generally, critical theory challenges traditional social theory (Aronowitz, 1972; Kellner, 1989; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Traditional theories seek to explain social phenomena through theory, whereas critical theory contextualizes and historicizes to explain society and social conditions (Horkheimer, 1972). Although traditional theories seek to describe and interpret life, critical theory engages research as a political act to critique power and work toward an ethical society (Giroux, 1997; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Torres, 1999). In other words, traditional theory is deductive, whereas critical theory is inductive; traditional theory is descriptive, whereas critical theory is normative.

In its rejection of traditional theory, critical theory rejects positivism. Positivism draws on natural sciences and mathematics to understand social life through quantification, generalizability, objectivity, and neutrality (Aronowitz, 1972; Giroux, 1997). This produces research that is ahistorical, decontextualized, and ideological under the guise of impartiality (Horkheimer, 1972). This approach also results in "the fetishism of facts" (Giroux, 1997, p. 41) and reinforces instrumentalism and social power structures (Giroux, 1997; Horkheimer, 1972; Torres, 1999). Using a mode of inquiry that reproduces the dominant social system prevents critique of that system and replicates dominant ideologies in social research (Aronowitz, 1972; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002; Kellner, 1989). Critical theory provides a way to break away from the acritical feedback loop of traditional theory and to account for power, values, and

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ideology (Carspecken, 2019; Giroux, 1997; Kellner, 1989; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Thus, critical theory provides an alternative to traditional theory by rejecting positivism, critiquing dominant social systems, and engaging normative analyses.

A core assumption of critical theory is subjectivity. Whereas traditional theory decontextualizes to generalize, critical theory relies on radical contextualization (Horkheimer, 1972). Critical theorists accept that humans have a situated viewpoint that makes objectivity unachievable and undesirable (Aronowitz, 1972; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Critical theory is also dialectical; it requires theses and antitheses to be in conversation from multiple and contradictory perspectives to gain a richer understanding of social phenomena (Aronowitz, 1972; Giroux, 1997; Horkheimer, 1972). Critical theory is contextual and historical, which allows one "to understand facts within the value-laden context wherein they assume meaning" (Bronner, 2017, p. 21) and to engage historical and material conditions, whereas mainstream theories do not (Horkheimer, 1972). As a contextual and historical project, critical theory is also interdisciplinary (Held, 1980; Horkheimer, 1972; Kellner, 1989). Critical theory engages with economic, political, social, and cultural areas and therein critiques the artificial boundaries between disciplines that result in abstractions and redundancies and keep scholars from engaging with social reality (Horkheimer, 1972; Kellner, 1989).

Critical theory is also relational, meaning it works to uncover social connections by exposing systemic and structural inequalities (Aronowitz, 1972; Horkheimer, 1972). In examining the status quo and questioning the social order, critical theory aims for social transformation (Horkheimer, 1972). This transformation is political and liberatory, striving to empower people and promote self-determination (Aronowitz, 1972; Giroux, 1997; Held, 1980; Horkheimer, 1972; Kellner, 1989; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). Transformation is only

achievable through praxis, which is the enactment of a philosophy (Giroux, 1997; Horkheimer, 1972; Kellner, 1989). Praxis leads to struggle and, ideally, social change (Kellner, 1989; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). From working class consciousness (Horkheimer, 1972) to organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971), praxis in vivo varies across key figures and traditions.

The Frankfurt School, Gramsci, and Althusser are key figures in the critical tradition. Their work informs CPEoC, curriculum theory, and the critical legal studies from which CRT grew. Coming out of fascist Germany between World Wars I and II, the Frankfurt School approached critical theory as an interdisciplinary critique of ideological hegemony and culture in capitalist society (e.g., Benjamin, 1936/1969; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002; Marcuse, 1964). Gramsci's (1971) neo-Marxist work in 1920s Italy engaged with dominant culture, ideology, and hegemony as organizing mechanisms in social consciousness. (Although his work predates theirs, Gramsci did not substantially influence the Frankfurt School and gained popularity in the United States only in the 1960s; Bronner, 2017.) Althusser's state apparatuses provide a frame to understand how the state can influence the subject through repressive and ideological social practices (Althusser, 2012).

CPEoC

This section includes an introduction of the purpose, goals, and assumptions of CPEoC, a brief description of its foundations, origins, and early work in the North American and British schools, as well as some common approaches, characteristics, and areas of research in CPEoC.

Purpose, Goals, and Assumptions

CPEoC enables scholars to understand how power operates in social relations and structures through analyses of the composition and contradictions of ownership, capital, and resource allocation in capitalist societies (Golding & Murdock, 1979; Mosco, 2009; Wasko,

2005). Through CPEoC, communication and culture are understood as material customs that construct social meaning (Mosco, 2009) and connect holistically to the larger social system and structures (McChesney, 1998). CPEoC also addresses the economic realities of capitalist societies in the analyses of media as cultural products. Through CPEoC, the economic and informative functions of mass media are scrutinized to explain power in capitalist societies (Murdock & Golding, 1973). Researchers using CPEoC can recognize mass media as commercial entities and acknowledge their dual role of responding to commercial forces while shaping and spreading ideologically imbued information (Murdock & Golding, 1973). Consideration of economics is important because economic forces impact the mass media industries individually and as a social institution (Murdock & Golding, 1973, 1979). Broadly, a scholar who uses CPEoC can understand communication in relation to society and "examines how media (and communication) systems and content reinforce, challenge, or influence existing class and social relations" (McChesney, 1998, p. 3).

CPEoC is a critique of the normative, apolitical, dominant approach to economics and extends to the systems, theories, and perspectives of mainstream, neoclassical economics (Gandy, 1992; Wasko, 2005). This critique allows CPEoC to be used to uncover how political and economic systems function in and through media to exert power, notably in areas of media systems, ownership, markets, technology, labor, governmental policy, and content (McChesney, 1998). In addition to critique, CPEoC also provides context for ideology in cultural products and cultural production because media production and media content are not separated from the economic and political environment in which they are created, distributed, and consumed (Golding & Murdock, 1979). Understanding these relations is important because media, in capitalist societies, are industrial and commercial producers and distributors of media

commodities, which, of course, differ by industry and location. That is, CPEoC enables scholars

to conceptualize media in neoliberal capitalism as "economic entities with both a direct

economic role as creators of surplus value through commodity production and exchange and an

indirect role, through advertising, in the creation of surplus value within other sectors of

commodity production" (Garnham, 1990). In other words, CPEoC helps to explain the how and

why of ideological processes, not just the what of ideology.

CPEoC, as a framework, is committed to democracy with special attention to

understanding the relationship between media and inequality because inequality is a threat to

democracy (McChesney, 2008). But understanding alone is insufficient. CPEoC supports efforts

to improve participatory democracy (McChesney, 1998, 2008). Those using CPEoC may ask,

"What structures and policies generate the media institutions, practices, and system more

conducive to viable self-government?" (McChesney, 2008, p. 13). The framework presupposes

that a functional democracy requires society "to create the conditions for relative equality and

civic participation across the political, economic, and cultural spheres" (Mosco, 2009, p. 155)

and that media and communication play central roles in creating or hampering those conditions.

Embedded within the purpose and goals of CPEoC are some assumptions. First, CPEoC

enables researchers to approach knowing and understanding the world with a realist

epistemology that rejects essentialism, foregrounds structures and processes, and centers social

values (Mosco, 2009). The next assumption a challenge to capitalism, capitalist societies, and

capitalist systems (McChesney, 1998) and acceptance that media, as cultural industries, "cannot

be separate from history of capitalism in the industrialized countries and the wider global

economy" (Fitzgerald, 2012, p. 30). This critique of capitalism supports the commitment of

CPEoC to democracy. Because capitalism relies on the inequality and individualism that weaken

democracy, CPEoC supports examinations of how media systems accelerate or slow that erosion (McChesney, 1998, 2008).

Another assumption is the constructed nature of media. Critical political economists accept that media systems are human constructions resulting from political and economic policies and decisions (McChesney, 2008); essentially, media systems are not natural, even though their size or influence may make them seem so. As part of that human-built system, CPEoC theorists often understand media as commodities in neoliberal capitalism. In fact, media systems serve a dual function in producing creativity, meaning media are ultimately framed and shaped by the economic context in which they were produced (Murdock & Golding, 1973). Therefore, an understanding of the media policies and economics of a society helps to explain media content and provide a fuller understanding of media texts. It is arguable that cultural analyses that fail to include economic analyses are incomplete (Golding & Murdock, 1973), and information itself is a major media commodity, one that is necessary for commercial survival (Murdock & Golding, 1973). Therefore, information and mass communication are reliant on the structures of the media industry, the structures built to reflect and support the interests that produce them. Communication goods have a "triple relation to commodity culture" (Murdock, 2011, p. 20): first, they are commodities themselves; second, they are the main platform for advertising other commodities; and third, they naturalize commodity culture.

Researchers using CPEoC accept that media function dually: they are both economic and ideological (Gandy, 1992; Murdock & Golding, 1973). In capitalist societies, media are industrial and commercial organizations that produce and distribute commodities while simultaneously producing ideas and culture that contribute to the economic and political structures in which they exist (Murdock & Golding, 1973). CPEoC accepts that the

superstructure cannot be separated from the base, meaning culture—and the consciousness it shapes—cannot be fully understood outside the economic conditions in which it was created (Garnham, 1990, 1995; Murdock & Golding, 1973, 1979). With the emphasis on economic structures, it is necessary to clarify the ways in which critical political economists understand economics.

Through CPEoC, understanding economics extends beyond monetary exchange: understanding the economic context in which cultural products are produced is key. In capitalist systems, the industrialization of mass communication must be considered. According to Murdock and Golding (1973), this should be considered in a variety of ways, including differentiation, concentration, and industrialization, to uncover the dynamics of supply, demand, and financing of mass media cultural products. One can also analyze media concentration by examining how integration, diversification, and internationalization occur within media entities. Understanding media concentration requires also thinking about media ownership to provide clarity on who owns and controls media and information businesses and markets in addition to content (McChesney, 1998; Wasko, 1984). Other economic measures include government policies that affect production and content and economic and financial supports such as advertising, sponsorship, and donations (McChesney, 1998). Industry and audience labor provide meaningful insight beyond semiotic interpretation (Meehan, 2002; Smythe, 1977). Researchers can use CPEoC to uncover how political and economic systems function in and through media to exert power, notably in the national and global areas of media ownership, markets, technology, labor, and governmental policy, and how these structures shape media systems and content.

CPEoC scholars approach research with a critical, realist perspective, understanding that media are human constructions that have real and meaningful systemic roles at both economic

and ideological levels. CPEoC aids in uncovering the interplay of media and power beyond

money to include policy, labor, industrialization, and concentration.

Foundational Work

CPEoC came from the classical political economist tradition and Marxist critiques of

capitalism (McChesney, 1998; Mosco, 2009; Wasko, 2005, 2014). The classical political

economists (e.g., Adam Smith and David Ricardo) centered labor's relation to wealth in their

philosophy of economics (Mosco, 2009). They also took a macroeconomic view shaped by

moral philosophy, in contrast to today's neoclassical economic shift to microeconomics and

social science (see Wasko, 2005). Where the classical political economists viewed the trajectory

to capitalism as natural and inevitable, Marx saw the path to capitalism as dialectical, meaning

that capitalism as a system of social relations resulted from conflicts and solutions to issues of

labor and society. Marx's influence on critical analysis cannot be understated; however, the

modern approach to CPEoC does not accept Marxism wholesale. One common critique of Marx

is that he "did not carry the social analysis of capitalism far enough" (Mosco, 2009, p. 43),

meaning that Marx's focus on labor excluded other forms of work, such as communication and

ideological production.

CPEoC grew during the 1950s and 1960s through the work of Smythe, Schiller,

Murdock, Golding, and Garnham (see Wasko, 2005, 2014). Early work in CPEoC rejected

positivism, behaviorism, and empiricism, instead focusing on the "mutual constitution" (Mosco,

2009, p. 79) between theory and behavior. The work was shaped by the immense social,

political, and economic fluctuations in the post-World War II world, including changes in

technology, sector growth, concentrated ownership, government role, globalization, and

imperialism, and the shift from an industrial economy to an information economy (Mosco,

2009). These global changes resulted in two approaches to critical political economy: the North

American school and the British school.

The North American school of critical political economy, shaped by Dallas Smythe and

Herbert Schiller, was a product of its time and place. These scholars were influenced by the

national and global politics of the 1960s, and their work was critical of the dominant paradigm

but not explicitly Marxist (Wasko, 2005). A scholar of telecommunications policy, Smythe

argued for the role of communication in the economy and coined the concept of the *audience*

commodity, an idea that reshaped media economics and served as an entry point for many

CPEoC scholars. Schiller grew up during the Great Depression in the United States and later

completed military work in post-World War II Germany. These experiences influenced his

contributions to the field, specifically in international communication, cultural imperialism, and

his critique of the information society (Mosco, 2009).

The British scholars took a more Marxist approach. The British critical political

economists emphasized communication and media as economic commodities under capitalism,

challenging instrumentality, critiquing modernity, and recognizing culture as an industry in

capitalist societies (Kellner, 1989; Wasko, 2005). For Garnham (1990), the Frankfurt School

explained that monopoly capitalism allows culture to be industrialized. And for Murdock and

Golding (1979), the Frankfurt School clarified that cultural domination is established by and

results from the economics of the cultural industries. The Frankfurt School influenced the British

scholars' views that the economic systems of media industries have cultural and social

implications but that these implications are not always determined by economics. As such, the

British scholars also emphasized the fundamental conflicts of power in cultural production. For

example, Murdock and Golding (1979) wrote that the mere presence of capitalism does not

guarantee the perpetuation of dominant ideology. Garnham (1979, 1990) critiqued the Frankfurt School for assuming the inevitability of capitalism to commodify and industrialize culture. These scholars highlighted the uncertainty of capitalism, which can be interrogated through CPEoC. For Murdock and Golding (1973) and Garnham (1979), media should first be understood as industries that play economic roles as producers and distributors of cultural products in direct and indirect ways. However, they also rejected correspondence theories because of the dialectical, contradictory nature of social entities. In other words, media are sites for struggle (Mosco, 2009). In decentering media in their political economy by focusing on the role of capital, the British scholars made CPEoC transdisciplinary (Mosco, 2009).

Approaches

CPEoC can be approached in many ways. Gandy (1992) identifies two approaches: (a) the *Marxist approach*, which focuses on the labor theory of capital, emphasizes production, and relies on historical analysis; and (b) the *individualist approach*, which challenges the notion that individuals and rationality drive industry and instead uses power structure analyses of leadership and ownership to understand how corporate control serves corporate interests. More than a decade after Gandy, Mosco (2009) highlighted how *institutional political economy* assumes that the organization of the economy is the defining characteristic of every economic function, whereas *Marxian political economy*, a broader and more diverse approach, attempts to make sense of capitalism. Two other important approaches to CPEoC are *feminist political economy*, which rethinks labor and other gendered issues, and *environmental political economy*, which critiques the economic rationality that abuses the environment and nature. Wasko (2005) identified other CPEoC areas of research in historical studies, media and communications

business, internationalization and globalization, media and state relations, and resistance and opposition.

Although the previous examples distinguish the broad conceptual divisions within CPEoC research, the following are the primary ways to think about economic functions in capitalism. Mosco (2009) identified commodification, spatialization, and structuration as three areas of focus in political economy that show how power functions through capital. First, *commodification* is the translation of use value into exchange value. Understanding communication as a commodity is essential because communication "contains symbols and images whose meaning helps to shape consciousness" (Mosco, 2009, p. 134). Content, audiences, and labor can all be understood as units of media that become commodified under capitalism. Next, *spatialization* refers to reducing the constraints of time and space through communication and media technologies. Spatialization supports corporate concentration through horizontal and vertical concentration, concentration of ownership, boards of directors, alliances, and regulation. Last, *structuration*, or "the process of creating social relations" (Mosco, 2009, p. 2) as "society and the individual create one another" (Mosco, 2009, p. 185), refers to the mutual constitution between society and individuals. In other words, humans create social structures while social structures shape humans. In the structuration process, power restricts how humans create social structures, specifically in areas of identity such as race.

Communication simultaneously serves and disrupts capitalism (Mosco, 2009) because the spread of communication and media technology makes it difficult to ensure restricted ownership and disrupts private property. Capitalism requires control of systems, but evolving communication technologies loosen those controls and enable disruption. Capitalism also requires control over workers, but controlling the knowledge labor that comes with the

information economy enabled by new communications technologies is more difficult than controlling manual labor. And while these examples of disruption can be applied to new media, CPEoC also examines how all that is old is new again: it can illuminate how the problems of new media may have core similarities to the problems of legacy media broadly by exposing how power—a force that transcends time and space—functions.

Core Characteristics

The approaches to CPEoC exemplify the ways in which communication and media can be understood through this theoretical lens. This research employs Mosco's (2009) central characteristics of CPEoC, which were corroborated by Wasko (2005, 2014) and Murdock and Golding (1973, 1979): an attention to social change and historical transformation, an understanding of the social totality and the influence of moral philosophy, and a commitment to praxis.

Attention to social change and historical transformation means that critical political economists include a historical dimension in their work. This is because capitalism is a "historical process" (McChesney, 1998, p. 4). Thus, an understanding of the current circumstances and relations requires an understanding of the past. The commitment to understanding social change and historical transformation reflects Marx's dialectic and the mutual constitution of society. It also demonstrates a basic acceptance that social relations are built and shaped by their history, and that social phenomena are dynamic (Wasko, 2005). Mosco (2009) put it simply: "One simply cannot do good political economy without an historical dimension" (p. 110). This first tenet is closely related to the second: understanding the social totality.

Understanding the social totality means accepting that social phenomena do not exist in a vacuum. This recognizes the many relationships and dynamics of social life and seeks to understand them (Mosco, 2009). To understand social totality, researchers must understand that capitalism cannot be extracted from the circumstances in which it exists (McChesney, 1998). This rejects the social scientific approach of neoclassical economics that atomizes the economy, separating it from the larger scope of social relations, in favor of a more "holistic approach" (Wasko, 2005, p. 27). In another rejection of liberal ideals and mechanistic rationality, the third tenet of CPEoC is the influence of moral philosophy.

In engaging moral philosophy, CPEoC incorporates "social values and conceptions of appropriate social practices" (Mosco, 2009, p. 32) into analyses of social phenomena. Instead of simply observing and reporting, critical political economists observe, report, and contribute what should be. Whereas social scientific approaches in neoclassical economics herald objectivity, CPEoC addresses the moral issues that are embedded in capitalist economic models, which is the "distinguishing characteristic of political economy" (Wasko, 2005, p. 27). From this duty to moral philosophy comes the fourth central characteristic: a commitment to praxis.

For CPEoC scholars, committing to praxis refers to putting theory into action; praxis is "philosophy made practical" (Mosco, 2009, p. 35). Praxis is the call to action through which CPEoC enacts the commitment to moral philosophy and the goal of social change (Wasko, 2005). Praxis, in this theoretical framework, has a dual function. First, it shapes what we accept as knowledge; critical political economists understand that knowledge is complete only when philosophy and experience are both engaged (Mosco, 2009). Second, in stark contrast to neoclassical economics, action-oriented praxis often leads critical political economists to be activist-scholars.

These four central characteristics illuminate the goals and values in CPEoC and exemplify the contrast from the dominant neoclassical approach to economics.

Conclusion

This section summarized the purpose, goals, assumptions, and foundations of CPEoC, including its origins and early work in its North American and British schools. The various approaches, research areas, and common characteristics of CPEoC research were also discussed. McChesney (2008) wrote, "Media do not explain everything, but understanding media is indispensable to grasping the way power works in contemporary societies" (p. 14). CPEoC is one tool for understanding how power structures—neoliberal capitalism and racism—function in MLE. But as McChesney said, understanding media does not explain it all. Therefore, the next section introduces curriculum theory.

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Curriculum Theory

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Critical curriculum theory is the theoretical framework that was used to analyze the curriculum developed by NLP. Curriculum theory is discussed here broadly through its goals and a brief history. A neo-Marxist approach to curriculum theory was applied in this study, and the assumptions of this approach are discussed below.

Definition and Brief History

Critical theory is an interdisciplinary pursuit, making it a useful and dynamic framework to apply to education. The application of critical theory to education "broadly seeks to expose how relations of power and inequality (social, cultural, economic), in their myriad forms, combinations, and complexities, are manifest and are challenged in the formal and informal education of children and adults" (Apple et al., 2009, p. 3). A critical approach enables researchers to investigate how power and oppression function across various and intersecting

dimensions of education. Using a critical approach acknowledges that schools exist relationally

as social, economic, political, and cultural institutions and therefore enable systems of power and

oppression (Apple, 2004). One area through which power exists is *curriculum*, the content and

materials of a course or class (Wyse et al., 2015). Curriculum theory, by its nature, is a critical

field that enables scholars to understand the role curricula play within this process of power

(Pinar, 2004; Pinar & Bowers, 1992). Central to the project of curriculum theory, and shared

with other critical traditions, is the understanding that this approach is not neutral; its goals are

emancipation, social change, and an end to oppression (Apple et al., 2009; Flinders & Thornton,

2009; Gottesman, 2012).

There is a longstanding tradition of critical action by historically marginalized

communities and educators who challenge racism, classism, and sexism in education (Apple et

al., 2009; Jones, 2020; Waller, 2011; Weinberg, 1977); thus, critiquing education is not new.

However, the critical tradition is newer in the academy. Although some early educators rejected

the use of education to reinforce class divisions and advocated for a collectivist approach to

education (e.g., Counts, 1932/2009), much early attention given to curriculum was regarding

educational management (Gottesman, 2012). This approach persisted into the 1970s and 1980s,

when social unrest pushed scholars to consider the histories, structures, and roles of schooling in

social and cultural reproduction (Apple et al., 2009; Gottesman, 2012; Grumet, 1989; Pinar &

Bowers, 1992). Critical approaches shifted focus to theory of curriculum (i.e., ideology) over

practical implementation of curriculum (i.e., intervention), more nuanced and complex class

analyses that included gender and race, and engagement with Marxist and neo-Marxist critiques

of culture and education (Apple et al., 2009; Grumet, 1989; Pinar, 2004). This critical turn in

education allowed scholars to begin demystifying the social complexity of schooling and education (Apple, 2004).

Critical Theory in Education

The use of Marxist theory in critiquing education was pivotal for education's critical turn in the 1970s and 1980s (Anyon, 2011). In the Marxist model of society, the base represents a society's economy, or the means and relations of production, while the superstructure is a society's institutions, state, and culture. Schooling, as an institution and arm of the state that creates and disseminates knowledge, functions as part of the superstructure. Marxist theorists Bowles and Gintis (1976) applied this model to explain how schools prepare students in ways that correspond directly to the needs of the economy. Marx's notion of alienation appears in schooling as students are separated from control of their education, as knowledge is artificially siloed, and as learning is increasingly quantified and commodified (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Knopp, 2012; Pinar & Bowers, 1992). In this way, Marxist theory "provides a valuable tool for theorists to interrogate how and even explain why schools seem to reproduce dominant social relations" (Au, 2006, p. 29). However, some critical education scholars have suggested that Marx's theory of society does not fully account for resistance and disruptions in schools that do not serve the economy. These scholars began seeking ways to complicate the base–superstructure relationship, turning to neo-Marxist thought (Anyon, 2011; Apple, 2004; Au, 2006; Knopp, 2012).

Extending the work of cultural scholars such as Williams and Hall, neo-Marxist curriculum theorists have treated education as a cultural process to understand its social and cultural relations and inequalities (see Anyon, 2011; Apple, 1986). Althusser's (2012) theory of ideological state apparatuses and Gramsci's (1971) theory of ideology and hegemony are

foundational; they create space for agency while still using a Marxist critique of capitalism (Au, 2006). Althusser (2012) proposed that a society's superstructure functions to benefit the ruling class in two ways: domination by force or domination by ideology. Domination by force occurs through *repressive state apparatuses* (RSAs), which enact control over a society through laws and policing. Domination by ideology occurs through *ideological state apparatuses* (ISAs), which enact control through belief systems and values. ISAs appear to be neutral or invisible, making them a perfect mechanism to reinforce dominant ideology. Schooling, as an institution with the charge and ability to educate the masses, operates as an ISA and thus can concretizes class relations (Althusser, 2012; Au, 2006; Pinar & Bowers, 1992). Where Marxism is often accused of economic determinism, Althusser's model gives the superstructure relative autonomy from the base. Thus, the base does not manipulate the superstructure directly, but both operate independently while informing and influencing the other, which makes this theory useful for understanding education (Au, 2006; Au & Apple, 2009). Althusser's theory of ISAs explains how the ruling class's ideology is perpetuated, which complements Gramsci's theory of ideology and hegemony.

Althusser's focus on the societal level can smack of determinism, but Gramsci's treatment of ideology and hegemony makes space for individual agency (Gottesman, 2012). Gramsci (1971) proposed that to gain social power, one group must dominate others and demonstrate leadership through force or ideology. In his model, *ideology* occurs in two ways: the societal level, like the superstructure, and at the individual level of people and their ideas. Superstructural ideology is the necessary component for domination. Gramsci argued that anything capable of influencing popular opinion is part of the ideological structure, including education and media, which he cited as consequential components. Ideology functions as it does

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because it exists through that which appears to be everyday common sense, rendering it invisible and natural, leading to cultural hegemony.

Hegemony is the common sense and lived culture, values, knowledge, and ideas that maintain domination of one class over all others (Gramsci, 1971). Apple (2004) wrote, "hegemony implies that fundamental patterns in society are held together by tacit ideological assumptions, rules if you will, which are not usually conscious, as well as economic control and power" (p. 80). Hegemony connects the base and the superstructure through the reproduction of the economy via ideology and institutions (Au, 2006; Au & Apple, 2009). In other words, both ideology (through culture such as media, news, and schools) and material conditions contribute to establishing hegemony (Anyon, 2011; Torres, 1999). Ideology and hegemony work in tandem: ideology as the prevailing and common sense ideas of a society, and hegemony as "the relationships between groups, especially social classes" (Torres, 1999, p. 106) that are maintained by and through dominant ideologies. Hegemony, therefore, is maintained by the group who can establish ideological control and discourse, often via education (Apple, 1986). Thus, ideology and hegemony become central theoretical concepts in neo-Marxist analyses of education (Apple, 1982, 1996, 2004).

Althusser and Gramsci's neo-Marxist frameworks have influenced curriculum theory in a few ways. This neo-Marxist theoretical approach establishes that education perpetuates ideology and establishes hegemony. Schools, as sites of cultural production that control which ideologies are maintained and reproduced, perform essential roles in establishing and maintaining ideological hegemony in a society (Apple, 1982; Giroux, 2011). Additionally, the form and function of schooling as an organizing social institution enables the invisibility and ordinariness necessary for cultural hegemony to dominate (Apple, 1982, 2004) even as individual human

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agency persists within individual schools (Au, 2006). A neo-Marxist frame implies that one role

of curriculum is to justify dominant ideology by setting the parameters within which students'

ideas and logics must operate (Apple, 2004), therein working on behalf of the dominant or ruling

class.

Curriculum theory analyses accept that schooling, as part of the larger social politic,

cannot be divorced from issues of power and authority (Giroux, 2011). Drawing on Gramsci's

work, Apple (2004) wrote that economic order pervades everyday life and logics, and ruling

class individuals and institutions, such as schooling, legitimize and naturalize these ideas.

Gramsci's framework provides a way to understand how politics penetrate all areas of life,

including education (Giroux, 2011). In this way, the dominant class rules society through control

of knowledge and institutions without necessarily serving all citizens' needs with that knowledge

or in those institutions (Apple, 2004). Schooling, as a dominant institution, is in part about

control.

As Gramsci argued, control over the knowledge preserving and producing sectors of a

society is a critical factor for enhancing the ideological dominance of one group of people or one

class over less powerful groups of people or classes. In this regard, the role of the school in

selecting, preserving, and passing on conceptions of competence, ideological norms, and

values—all of which are embedded within both the overt and hidden curricula in schools—is of

no small consequence (Apple, 2004, p. 54).

Apple highlighted the consequential role schooling plays in identifying whose knowledge

matters and how that knowledge is packaged, taught, and reinforced through educational choices,

such as curriculum. Because of this role of cultural control, school is a hegemonic process in its

ability to create consensus and establish common goals and values that benefit only select

members of society (Apple, 1982, 2004). The curriculum plays an essential role in this process of creating, establishing, and maintaining hegemony. However, education can also be a site for counterhegemonic learning through critical thinking and by fostering organic intellectuals (Giroux, 2011; Gramsci, 1971). That is, education does not need to be inherently or permanently bound to the role of domination as an ISA; it can play a transformative and liberatory role.

Assumptions

General assumptions of curriculum theory used in this study were drawn largely from the work of Apple (1982, 1992, 1996, 2001, 2004; Apple & Au, 2009; Apple & Beyer, 1983) and should be understood as a frame for this research rather than a comprehensive account of curriculum theory.

The first assumption is that society is experiencing a structural crisis of capitalism. Under neoliberal capitalism, society faces economic, political, ideological, and cultural turning points (Apple, 1982) because "capitalism is an economic system that cannot function without fundamental inequality" (Anyon, 2011, p. 7). Examples include unemployment; wealth inequality among classes, races, and genders; partisan political divisions; climate change and environmental degradation; post-truth rhetoric; and systemic failures exposed during global pandemics. At the onset of the neoliberal capitalist era, Apple (1982) wrote that structural crises exemplify "unequal power" (p. 7) inherent to a capitalist society. Nearly 40 years of neoliberal capitalism later, one can speculate if things are the same or worse, but conditions have not improved.

The second assumption of curriculum theory is that Marxist analyses of schooling's functions, such as the principle of correspondence (Bowles and Gintis, 1976), are deterministic when they lack engagement with the superstructure—including the role of teachers, curriculum,

culture, and students—as a dynamic force in education (Apple, 2004; Au, 2006; Au & Apple, 2009; Pinar & Bowers, 1992). Schooling is an ISA, so it carries a reproductive function, yet intervening factors, such as contradictory ideologies and individual agency, prevent correspondence theory from fully explain schooling's functions (Apple, 1982). However, thinking about education's reproductive function as rational in an unequal society, not as a conspiratorial or orchestrated plan for inequality, is valuable (Apple, 2004). From this perspective, curriculum and classroom relations work to produce the political economic effects that maintain hegemonic social systems (Apple, 2004). Although a more nuanced understanding of the reproduction function of education is valuable, education has other functions, too.

A third assumption is that under capitalism, education serves specific and necessary functions for capital (Apple & Beyer, 1983). The first function is accumulation of capital, which refers to education's support in recreating a class society and wealth inequality by preparing and acculturating workers. This reflects reproduction theory in that accumulation allows for "reproducing a hierarchically organized labor force" (Apple & Beyer, 1983, p. 428). The next function is legitimation of capital and the ideologies that support it (Apple, & Beyer, 1983), whereby schooling, by virtue of what is and is not included in the curriculum, defines a society's acceptable ideas (Apple, 2004). Thus, schooling is political (Apple, 1992) and shapes which ideologies become dominant (Apple, 1982). The last function is production, in which education produces the technical and administrative knowledge required for a capitalist economy to work (Apple & Beyer, 1983). Through these functions, schooling teaches what is needed to exist in society, produces the knowledge necessary for the economy to function, and maintains a culture receptive to those economic needs (Apple, 1982, 2004).

Whereas CPEoC centers on media and communication, curriculum theory focuses on education as dynamic but structuring social systems that naturalize and normalize power and control. Curriculum theory sees curricular materials as important because they are (often) unquestioned examples of the "circuit of cultural production" (Apple, 1996, p. 129). In critiquing what is taught, curriculum theory unearths overt and hidden hegemonies, illustrating the assumption that curriculum is not neutral or democratic. Instead, curriculum reflects power (Apple, 1992; Flinders & Thornton, 2009), making political the questions and decisions of what counts as knowledge (Giroux, 2011; Pinar & Bowers, 1992). Fundamentally, "curriculum in schools responds to and represents ideological and cultural resources that come from somewhere" (Apple, 2004, p. 44). This means choices are made regarding what is included and excluded. Within those choices, some ideologies are privileged and included while others are erased. In recent history, the ideologies and interests most privileged in schools are those that benefit global capitalism (Giroux, 2011). Social structures and systems of power influence what is legitimized as knowledge (Apple, 2004, 2009). These influential, undemocratic "systems of control" (Apple, 1986, p. 82) include the structures inside and outside the classroom that affect schooling, such as the curriculum and its artifacts.

Curriculum theory has enabled scholars to acknowledge two different curricula: the covert or hidden curriculum and the overt or official curriculum. Each enables power differently. *Hidden curriculum* is the day-to-day, commonplace aspects of schooling that are standardized, routinized, and implicit (Jackson, 2009) and serves to establish norms in behaviors and ideas that go unquestioned because of their invisibility (Apple, 2004). Although the original intent was regarding the invisible routines of school, the hidden curriculum has since been expanded conceptually to include "the ideas normalized in the curriculum itself" (Gottesman, 2012, p.

574). The "curriculum itself" is the *overt* or *official curriculum*, meaning the approved, formal curricular materials usually supplied by the school or state. Because curricular space is finite, the formal curriculum "can become a form of social and economic control" (Apple, 2004, p. 61) through which "cultural legitimacy on the knowledge of specific groups" (p. 61) is given and "hegemony is created and recreated" (p. 77). When evaluating curriculum, it is necessary to consider the overt and hidden curricula relationally and contextually (Apple, 2004).

The assumption that curricula are not created democratically acknowledges that small groups of people create, select, and approve curricula (Apple, 1992). In this process, only certain visions, ideas, and perspectives are included or represented (Apple, 2004). When minority groups' perspectives are included, they may be coopted to reflect or benefit the view of the dominant group (Apple, 1992). This is evident in textbooks, which research has shown are not neutral or democratic because they are created under similar development processes and systems of control (Apple, 2004). This study treats curricular materials, including online materials developed for students and teachers, as a proxy for textbooks. Curricular texts are subject to economic, cultural, and political pressures: they are commodities that must be ideologically appealing to be sold (Apple, 1992, 1996, 2001) and thus capture a specific version of reality that legitimizes the knowledge and culture of their producers (Apple, 1986) and are often crafted to appeal to a wide audience in ways that reflect hegemonic ideals (Apple, 2001). Why does this matter? Because despite their labor-based and democratizing history, curricular materials, such as textbooks and equivalent curricular materials that appeal to a mass market through dominant ideologies, often define the course of study in a classroom (Apple, 1986, 2001).

The final assumption included here is that education must be understood relationally, meaning educational analysis must historicize and contextualize. Like critical theories more

broadly, consideration of the social totality in which a phenomenon exists before analyzing it helps to illuminate the connections between society and the phenomenon that may be hidden otherwise (Apple, 2004). Life gets separated, atomized, and abstracted, so thinking about schooling relationally reveals connections among individuals, social movements, institutions, and structures and enables understanding of their interrelated ties, the directionality of power, the influences of culture, and how social systems are organized (Apple, 2004). For example, Apple (2001) provided a relational analysis to understand the sociopolitical context of education since the 1980s, when four major interest groups worked interdependently to influence education and education reform, which he called "conservative modernization." The four groups are (a) neoliberals, whose focus is primarily neoliberal capitalist economics; (b) neoconservatives, who support Western cultural dominance; (c) authoritarian populists, who advocate for Christian hegemony; and (d) the managerial class, who hold the technical and administrative knowledge to operationalize the agendas of the other three groups. Without a relational perspective, the connections of these disparate groups in educational reform may have remained unnoticed. An understanding of these sociopolitical and economic relations is necessary to understand or analyze the role of ideology on curricular materials.

Conclusion

This section introduced curriculum theory and defined and placed in context broadly through its goals and history. The neo-Marxist approach to curriculum theory was explaind in the present study, as were the ways neo-Marxist theories inform curriculum theory and its assumptions. Curriculum theory cannot pose or answer every question about education (Apple, 2004; Rexhepi & Torres, 2011). Although a neo-Marxist critical perspective can work toward an emancipatory future, education is a complex institution with various influences and players. As

part of the interdisciplinary tradition of critical research, the next section introduces the

remaining framework used in this project: CRT.

<h1 style="text-align:center">CRT</h1>

Although science shows that race has no biological meaning in humans, race is a social

construction that continues to have material impacts on people's lives (Ladson-Billings, 1998;

Oluo, 2018). CRT is an approach to understanding race, racism, and power through theoretical

and practical application (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT provides scholars a framework

through which to examine implicit and explicit manifestations of race and racism in all aspects of

American life; "the task at hand is to interrogate (racial) power where we live, work, socialize

and exist" (Crenshaw, 2011, p. 1348). This section reviews the history, general tenets, and

criticism of CRT.

A Brief History

CRT was theorized to address race, racism, and power within the U.S. legal context. CRT

scholars accept that "racism is not only a practical problem but an intellectual one" (Leonardo,

2013, p. 22). Although some scholars are finding ways to apply CRT to other countries (e.g.,

Gillborn, 2006), it developed from the unique post-Civil Rights movement in the United States

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Tate, 1997). CRT was influenced by the era's dominant discourses

about race and racism, student movements, the slowing of civil rights gains, and gaps in critical

legal studies.

Two dominant discourses surrounding race and racism dominated in the 1960s and

1970s. Integrationists saw racism as a cognitive issue, an irrational way of thinking among

individuals that led to prejudice or bias enacted through institutions, that could be solved with

equal treatment such as desegregation (Peller, 1995). Black nationalists viewed racism as an

issue of power, not of rationality or merit, and emphasized historicizing and contextualizing

experience, rejecting universalism, and advocating for understanding the connections between

social meaning and historical structures. Black nationalist discourse set the stage for critical legal

studies, out of which came CRT (Peller, 1995).

In addition to the philosophical discourses on race and racism of the 1960s, student

activism contributed to building an atmosphere in which CRT developed (Cho & Westley,

2002). Student-led diversity movements—such as the 1964 Free Speech Movement at the

University of California, Berkeley, the 1968 Third World Strike, and 1970s coalition building—

elevated race consciousness on campuses and resulted in the hiring of more diverse faculty

whose curriculum fortified commitments to social justice work, such as antiracism and equality

(Cho & Westley, 2002). Education and law are two fields in which this occurred (Tate, 1997).

Although the student movements created momentum, the slowing of civil rights progress

by the 1970s and 1980s frustrated some legal scholars who saw that the dominant views of race

and racism in traditional legal studies that relied on universalism were inadequate for achieving

social justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). This

essentialized approach erases the unique characteristics of a legal case, those involved, and the

particularities of the institution. Legal scholar Derrick Bell, Jr. responded to this dismissal of

context with the idea of indeterminacy, or the understanding that legal cases can have more than

one outcome based on reasoning and interpretation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Indeterminacy

proposes that essentialism or universalism do not account for context, which can change legal

outcomes; it suggests that there is more than one way to see the world.

In the 1980s, indeterminacy allowed critical legal scholars who were interested in race

and racism to break away from class-minded critical legal scholars to focus on how the law

upheld and reinforced racial oppression (Dixson, 2018). An annual critical legal studies conference developed a minority caucus in 1987, which led to the formal and organized Critical Race Theory Workshop in Madison, Wisconsin in 1989 (Crenshaw, 2002). CRT was formalized not as a critique of critical legal studies but as an extension to address race and racism in the law and put it in conversation with other critical approaches to law and legal studies (Tate, 1997).

Central Tenets and Criticisms

A discussion of the tenets of CRT must include acknowledgment that the central ideas are not fixed: "there is no canonical set of doctrines or methodologies to which we all subscribe" (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii). There are common interests among those who use CRT: understanding white supremacy and racialized power in the United States and working to disrupt and change this system (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). This section outlines the common ideas that ground the work of many CRT scholars, addresses two different approaches to CRT, and acknowledges some critiques of the theory.

A central assumption of CRT is that racism is normalized in and central to U.S. life and society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Leonardo, 2013; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Matsuda et al., 1993; Solórzano, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997; Taylor, 1998; Yosso, 2005). In other words, racism is built into American society; it is "endemic" (Tate, 1997, p. 234) with an "ordinariness" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 8) that renders it invisible and "almost unrecognizable" (Taylor, 1998, p. 122). CRT recognizes that those who hold power ascribe importance and define what counts as knowledge (Peller, 1995), thereby making knowledge subject to the goals and values of those with power. It follows that racial oppression is not a conspiracy but an outcome of hegemony (Leonardo, 2013). Gramsci's theory of hegemony helps explain how racism is baked into American social institutions to the

point of being hidden and inseparable from them (Ladson-Billing, 1998; Lynn & Parker, 2006). The critical aspect of this theoretical approach is the identification of the oppressed–oppressor dynamics that exist and re-created in social relationships (Leonardo, 2013). Thus, a general goal of CRT is to expose where and how racism is perpetuated throughout social structures, institutions, hegemonies, and ideologies.

CRT critiques liberalism, challenging the philosophical and foundational pillars of the Enlightenment, such as individualism, equality, universalism, rationalism, and neutrality, all of which claim to ensure a just society (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Matsuda et al., 1993). This critique proposes that liberal ideals—specifically neutrality, meritocracy, objectivity, and colorblindness—are used to uphold fairness and equality while hiding and protecting white privilege (Chang, 2020; Crenshaw et al., 2019; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2006; Valdes et al., 2002). White privilege is "an invisible package of unearned assets" (McIntosh, 1988/2013, p. 278) granted to white people or people appearing white that is not granted to others. CRT seeks to understand how objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness, and meritocracy privilege whiteness and oppress all other races (Gillborn, 2006; Taylor, 1998). Thus, CRT works to uncover how liberalism, which ignores race as a meaningful social identity, invisibly benefits whiteness.

These ideas were central to CRT's formation: "Critiques of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, meritocracy, and formal equality constituted the most common themes that linked our work" (Crenshaw, 2002, p. 21). To this end, CRT scholars have continued to address these points, arguing that colorblindness makes whiteness normative and perpetuates white supremacy and racial inequality (Crenshaw et al., 2019); that objectivity normalizes white subjectivity as the default perspective (Alemán, 2017; Lynn & Parker, 2006; McIntosh,

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1988/2013); that the intercentricity of race, meaning its deep integration through all areas of life and social narratives, results in objectivity being impossible (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); and that colorblindness obscures the structural benefits afforded to whiteness, resulting in a "historical whiteness protection program" (Lipsitz, 2019, p. 24). These contributions to CRT challenge dominant ideologies (Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005).

The social construction thesis poses that race and racism are not natural but are the result of social relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Thus, race and racism are contextual; how groups are racialized changes based on time, place, and the needs of those in power to control the labor market (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Whereas liberalism promotes decontextualized and ahistorical universalism, CRT recognizes that social relations (i.e., race) are "chosen, not inevitable" (Taylor, 1998, p. 123) and part of a "dominant narrative frame" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 20). Thus, individual experiences must be contextualized and historicized to fully understand the function of race and racism in time and place and to challenge the common sense hegemonies and ideologies that reinforce and replicate race and racism (Gillborn, 2006; Leonardo, 2013; Matsuda et al., 1993; Tate, 1997). CRT advocates for antiessentialism and intersectionality, which recognize that people of the same racial group experience race and racism differently because other facets of identity through which oppression and privilege occur create different lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Essentialized or universal narratives are insufficient for understanding social reality; instead, social reality must be understood through "the creation and exchange of stories about individual situations" (Tate, 1997, p. 210).

To do this, CRT relies on the value of experiential knowledge, which accepts that lived experiences of people of color are valuable and necessary to understanding race and racism in the United States (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Matsuda et al.,

1993; Solórzano, 1997; Tate, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Because the dominant liberal paradigm relies on objectivity, neutrality, and universalism, which CRT understands as tools of master narratives, incorporating experiential knowledge through storytelling challenges white normativity (Lynn & Parker, 2006), reinforces contextualization and antiessentialism (Taylor, 1998), and captures the experiences of people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Thus, the use of experiential knowledge enables authentic and critical ways of understanding subordination and oppression (Solórzano, 1997) through research and writing that challenge and reject positivist styles (Bell, 1995).

The final two tenets of CRT are implicit yet should be stated clearly: (a) CRT is an interdisciplinary pursuit, and (b) the goal of CRT is ending racial oppression and all oppression (Matsuda, et al., 1993). Because of its interdisciplinarity, CRT pushes scholars to reevaluate the ability of their framework to provide compelling analyses of racialized people (Tate, 1997) and promotes drawing on a variety of perspectives and ideas to understand the historical and contemporary issues of race and racism in the United States (Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005). The goal of ending oppression requires thinking intersectionally and interdisciplinarily to include other aspects of identity (Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005). This goal is necessary for justice (Tate, 1997) but presents the challenge of interest convergence (Bell, 1980), which is the idea that racism is advantageous for white people across classes, so the motivation to challenge, question, and dismantle racism is likely to be low until challenging racism becomes personally beneficial (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Taylor, 1998). The interdisciplinary goal of CRT is to work toward justice by eliminating oppression.

Approaches and Critiques

How to work toward ending oppression differs among CRT scholars, resulting in different approaches to the work and internal and external criticism. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) have highlighted two general types of CRT scholars: idealists and realists. Idealists address racism through "matters of thinking, mental categorization, and discourse" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 21), for example through critique of media representations of different racialized groups. Alternatively, realists, or economic determinists, approach race and racism as systems closely related to class through which "society allocates privilege and status" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 21). For example, CRT can be used to examine educational curriculum, a structuring force that implicitly and explicitly reinforces systems of power. Both approaches utilize CRT to answer different questions.

One area of contention between these two outlooks concerns where CRT scholars should focus their efforts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Is CRT better suited to investigate issues of materiality or linguistics? Should CRT scholars give more attention to issues of identity or to social analysis? Additionally, some CRT scholars see a disconnect between theory and activism, which leads to questions of balancing the two (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These internal critiques are ongoing conversations about how to carry out the work of a relatively young theoretical framework.

Other academic critiques include the acknowledgment that CRT does not have an agreed-upon definition for the concept of race. Although Leonardo (2013) has written that lacking consensus is common in social theory, he also noted that this absence of a definition for race means CRT must carefully contend with the nuances and overlaps of ethnicity, nationality, and race. Leonardo (2013) noted that Marxist approaches can clearly define laborers and capitalists,

but CRT researchers cannot partition as easily because of the intersectionality, complexity, and social constructedness of race in the United States. Without a definition for race, how racial groups are organized and interrogated becomes complex and runs the risk of homogenization, oppression, or erasure of groups who experience racialization.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) summarized some other criticisms of CRT research, including that it claims victimization of racism without adequate or effective justification, that it allows researchers to build narratives through storytelling to advance personal agendas, and that it disrupts "traditional notions of truth and merit" (p. 103). All these critiques appear to exemplify white fragility, "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 54). This kind of violent defensiveness mirrors Crenshaw's (2002) reflection on CRT's critiques: CRT is seen as a threat trying to destroy "cherished institutions or way of life" (p. 24), challenging the status quo of whiteness and discomforting white Americans. However, Crenshaw (2002) also stated that criticism of CRT is contradictory, as evidenced in the claim that CRT is disorganized or unsystematic but simultaneously deeply influential and unifying. CRT researchers also have been characterized as angry, rude, and "beyond all reason" (Crenshaw, 2002, p. 24).

Even though Crenshaw's words are 20 years old, and CRT is more than 30 years old, these critiques of CRT as a dangerous, destabilizing threat to American life continue today. Take for example Donald Trump's 2020 directive that banned federal agencies from using CRT or addressing white privilege in trainings (Schwartz, 2020). CRT in education also has become a crisis point used to mobilize the U.S. political right (Kang, 2022). This suggests that CRT continues to be an existential threat to whiteness and white supremacy, as evidenced by the effort power puts into limiting its reach and impact.

Conclusion

CRT highlights that social constructions, specifically race, have material consequences for the lived experiences of all people, not only those who have been racialized. CRT provides scholars a framework through which to examine implicit and explicit manifestations of race and racism in all aspects of American life. For this study, the aspects of life in question were media and education in the form of news literacy education. This section reviewed the history and general tenets of CRT, then addressed approaches to doing CRT work, as well as criticism of the theory.

Putting Theories in Conversation

This research examined the relationships between NLP's organizational structure and its educational curriculum, with specific attention on how racist and neoliberal capitalist ideologies are implicitly and explicitly reinforced or rejected. The following section includes an explanation of how CPEoC, curriculum theory, and CRT work together, how they contributed to this study, and how my positionality affected the research.

Contrasting and Complementary Theories

This research was guided by CPEoC, curriculum theory, and CRT. Because each framework has a different perspective with different aims, the ways in which they align and diverge should be considered. Because they stem from the critical tradition, these theories have some broad overlap. They are interdisciplinary so using together is well-suited for this research, which draws on the fields of media and education to analyze a media literacy organization and its products. These theories also are normative and engage praxis to end oppression and encourage liberation. Each theoretical frame also rejects liberalism and positivism, shedding the pretense of objectivity and neutrality in traditional theory in favor of subjectivity and contextualization

necessary for critical analysis. These theories also utilize the concepts of ideology and hegemony to understand the social order and the functions of power within that order. Those who employ these theories do not psychologize or individualize oppression but instead consider what is happening in structural and societal ways. Although these theories align in various ways, there are notable differences.

CPEoC draws more directly from a tradition that gives primacy to economics for understanding social institutions, whereas neo-Marxist curriculum theory focuses on culture and agency. These concepts are often understood as oppositional. However, the common critique of economic determinism may be inaccurate; because Marxism is based on dialectical materialism, its reliance on dynamic and relational processes instead of cause-and-effect relationships makes it impossible for it to be deterministic, which would make it "anti-dialectical" (Au, 2006, p. 42). From this perspective, these two approaches may be more complementary than competitive.

Similarly, CRT's compatibility with curriculum theory and CPEoC has been questioned (Cole, 2009; Gillborn, 2009). Leonardo (2013) wrote that the central objectives of Marxism and CRT—class and race, respectively—do not align. Although Marxist theories engage with and oppose racism, their central problem is class, which positions racism as epiphenomenal to material relations (Anyon, 2011). For CRT, Marxism fails to effectively address the racialization of society. CRT scholars understand race as the central structure of social oppression, with capitalism as the social outcome that justifies the ideology of racism. This discrepancy regarding which mechanisms of oppression function at the center of each theory is important to acknowledge; however, critical Marxist theories do not ignore racism, and CRT does not ignore capitalism. Any sociological approach must engage with racism because "race is not an 'add on'" (Apple, 1996, p. 137), capital and class are inherent components of racism (Ladson-Billings

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& Tate, 1995), and an understanding of racial hierarchies is an important part of examining power structures in society (Mosco, 2009).

Preston (2010) wrote that situating these theories in opposition is not helpful or productive; it is more productive instead to acknowledge their interdependent functions. He proposed two forms of domination: concrete racial domination and abstract racial domination. Concrete racial domination is the complex material and social forms of oppression resulting from white supremacy, whereas abstract racial domination is the interpellation of race as a form of capital for the benefit of capitalism. This is different than seeing capital or race as by-products of the other; instead, "race emerges both as a concrete category and also as a unique but perpetual moment in the circulation of value" (Preston, 2010, p. 119). This requires two shifts. First, the central problematic must change from class to capital. With this abstraction, the system of capitalism, and not its manifestations in class relations, must be evaluated. The second shift is in understanding race as a form of capital. Thus, as whiteness is given value (as it becomes capital), other races also are given value as capital distinct from the labor racialized bodies perform. This process of racializing functions both abstractly as ideology and materially as racism. Considering race as capital within a system of capital begins to bridge these two theoretical positions.

Application of Theories

Critical theories contribute to research broadly in multiple ways. Critical theories provide unique framing for research questions, critiques of ideology and hegemony, and commitment to democracy and liberation (Held, 1980). Marxist critical theory informs curriculum theory and its examination of education as a cultural institution within capitalist systems CPEoC's commitment to understanding how power functions through media, communication, and information. CPEoC,

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curriculum theory, and CRT all challenge liberalism, question social institutions, and commit to goals of social justice and liberation, but each framework has its distinct focus and perspective.

Curriculum theory posits that education is relational, economic, political, cultural, and ideological. Education is relational and sociological because it reflects society as simultaneously economic, ideological, political, and cultural (Apple, 1982). Because education is often siloed, curriculum theory reintegrates education relationally, which allows an understanding of how education is connected to, influenced by, and influences other aspects of social life. One of those aspects is the economy. One function of education is to produce workers and conditions to reproduce the economic system. Concurrently, what is taught is also economic; curricular materials are commodities that must appeal broadly to a wide market to be profitable, and they reflect dominant ideologies and perpetuate accepted cultural hegemonies. This study included an evaluation of curricular materials, specifically NLP's Checkology® curriculum, as cultural artifacts for analysis, following Apple's (1986) approach in *Teachers and Texts*. Curriculum theory also assumes that education is political and cultural; education engages issues of power and how it shapes our lived experiences and understandings. In this study, the political nature of education was especially salient when considering the context in which a curriculum is created, involving what is included and excluded in the hidden and official curricula. A foundational idea for this study was that power in the creation of educational materials has real implications in curriculum and can affect how society and culture are reproduced.

Because education is economic and cultural, and thereby political, an understanding of curriculum allows researchers "to see how cultural domination works" (Apple, 1982, p. 21) and how ideology is established. Accounting for only economics, politics, or culture is incomplete and fails to address the systems of domination that are created through the interrelation of these

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varied roles of education. From the position that cultural, economic, and political elements are relational, curriculum theory helps to uncover the relationships between ideology, hegemony, and curriculum.

CPEoC helps to ground hegemony, which is essential for understanding media and their ability to influence and organize social understanding. Hegemony, which largely explains that social control exists through consent rather than coercion, can act as a lens for understanding structuration (Mosco, 2009). Hegemony exists between ideology and values; it is neither imposed by power nor produced through social connections (Mosco, 2009). Instead, it is the continual making and remaking of common sense that shapes what is considered natural in social life, and it serves dominant social power structures, namely race and neoliberal capitalism. With an explicit commitment to democracy and self-governance, critical political economy often exposes other hierarchies of power (McChesney, 2008; Mosco, 2009).

CPEoC provides a framework to critique neoliberalism. Gandy's (1992) common assumptions about neoliberal capitalism and critiques from CPEoC highlight challenges to the status quo and neoliberal capitalism. For example, Gandy (1992) wrote that neoliberal capitalism operates under the common belief that preferences and choices are rational and stable, reflecting consumer desires. CPEoC challenges this view by proposing that preferences among individuals are diverse, and the market is what limits choices. Another assumption is that the free market functions perfectly. CPEoC presents an opposing view, proposing that markets require regulation to work and that distinct markets cannot be generalized. A CPEoC framework allowed Gandy (1992) to challenge other widely held beliefs, such as the notions that information is a commodity that functions as a market, that markets naturally stabilize, that markets are competitive, and that state intervention into the market is objective.

CPEoC provides a valuable counterbalance to textual analysis. Overreliance on textual interpretation can easily ignore the conditions under which the text was produced (Golding & Murdock, 1979), overstate the freedom achieved through consumerism, and simultaneously diminish the role of capital in media texts (Garnham, 1990). Media studies and cultural studies may be ahistorical and relativist without an economic anchor to the time and space in which cultural texts are produced (Garnham, 1990; Golding & Murdock, 1979). CPEoC posits that the base–superstructure relation is dialectic; seeing the base and superstructure as mutually constitutive prevents economic reductionism and ideological autonomy (Garnham, 1990). This understanding is essential for analyzing media as ideological apparatuses, which must be understood as economic entities within a capitalist economy and a sociohistorical context (Garnham, 1990; Golding & Murdock, 1979; Murdock & Golding, 1979), and for explaining the how and why of ideological processes rather than ideology alone (Garnham, 1990).

Unlike CPEoC and curriculum theory, CRT does not focus on a single social structure, although its origin is in law and legal studies. Instead, CRT scholars assume that all social structures have inherent racist biases, including media and education. Thus, CRT is especially useful for uncovering and understanding where and how white supremacy functions in the taken-for-granted naturalized institutions, discourses, and spaces, especially those such as education and media, which are often protected by the liberal myths of freedom, truth, and meritocracy. In essence, CRT can illuminate that which is on the margins.

CRT scholars not only reject objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness, and meritocracy, they see these concepts as the mechanisms that enable and uphold racism. Analyses of curricula that use CRT effectively illustrate how these ideals of liberalism manifest as white supremacy in education (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). These same ideals, specifically neutrality and

objectivity, underscore the journalistic paradigm. CRT is then a useful lens for analyzing racism and white supremacy in news literacy education.

Although some may have critiqued CRT for lacking cohesion on agreement among its scholars, this theory provides an analytical framework for understanding social institutions, social texts, and individual experiences. Thus, CRT is useful for analyzing curricula, including curricular materials, procedures, and discourse (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Yosso, 2002). When using CRT to analyze curriculum, researchers have found a history of racial exclusion in curriculum and textbooks and the marginalization of students of color, which teachers may be unable to challenge or oppose racist discourses built into curricula (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Yosso, 2002). Although counter-storytelling is one of CRT's most notable features, this research did not include that aspect and instead relied on the CRT framework for textual analysis.

Why were CRT and curriculum theory frameworks important for evaluating the critical political economy of NLP and analyzing its curriculum? In many ways, these critical theories employed in this research challenge the shared professional tenets of education and news journalism—objectivity, neutrality, meritocracy, and unbiased truth—and precedent exists for use of these theories to investigate these institutions. For example, becoming institutionalized to achieve cultural assimilation has been a goal of public education (Peller, 1995). To achieve this, curricula are often presented as neutral, apolitical educational tools that perpetuate liberal ideals in their content (Apple, 2004; Yosso, 2002). However, curriculum is value laden; someone's choices dictate what will be included in and excluded from the official and hidden curricula. Functioning as a master script, curricula legitimate power by establishing a default that reflects the powerful as natural or normal, whereas those without power are silenced to maintain hegemony (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Swartz, 1992).

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Similarly in early North American journalism, objectivity was used to teach the trade (Mirando, 2001), professionalize and legitimize the industry (Kaplan, 2006; Schiller, 1979), establish trust and authority as an industry (Robinson & Culver, 2019), and separate the industry from radical and partisan press publications through "independent and impartial information that allowed citizens to form their own opinion about important local, national, and international news" (Hackett & Zhao, 1998, p. 27). Journalistic objectivity requires the dependency of journalists on authorities and experts without challenge to authority or interpretation of information (Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Jenkins & Griffin Padgett, 2011). Like curriculum, journalism is value laden; someone chooses the stories to follow, the angles to report, the length of the story, and the sources to call experts. Objectivity also can be used strategically to protect journalists from public criticism (Tuchman, 1972) or by public figures to perpetuate bothsideism (Jordan, 2021). Despite all the ways it functions, journalistic objectivity developed in service to capital; it allowed commercial newspapers to situate themselves as guardians of the public and protectors of the public good (Carey, 1969/1997; Schiller, 1979). Even as the industry standard shifts to fairness and balance in reporting as it accepts that complete objectivity and neutrality are unattainable (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014), underlying liberal ideals live on through these standards (Jenkins & Griffin Padgett, 2011; Reese, 1990).

Education and media are two ISAs, and their reach as social structures that organize our collective and individual realities must be considered. CRT founders Delgado and Stefancic (2017) called this "the 'ordinary business' of society—the routines, practices, and institutions that we rely on to do the world's work" (p. 27). Education and news media are both ordinary businesses, the social institutions that reinforce dominant ideologies and maintain hegemony through the boundaries set by curricula (Apple, 1982, 2004) and the "second-hand reality

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received through news media" (Reese, 1990, p. 392). The theoretical frames in this research were used as analytical lenses that challenge the accepted ideals of these institutions and uncover their accepted and hidden ideologies. These critical frameworks were used to ask and answer questions of power, institutions, economics, culture, ideology, and hegemony. Each contributed to the framework used for analyzing NLP and its curriculum.

Approach and Positionality

The present study included CPEoC, curriculum theory, and CRT as theoretical frameworks for analyze analysis of NLP's organization and news literacy curriculum. These theories allowed evaluation of the ways NLP's organization and news literacy education curriculum implicitly and explicitly reinforce and reject racist and neoliberal capitalist ideologies and the ways that is influenced by the organization's structure. Because historically Marxist critical theories have been charged with subjugating or ignoring the role of race in their social analyses (Leonardo, 2013), the use of CRT with CPEoC and curriculum theory allowed full engagement in this study with the interdependence of racism and capitalism in these educational structures.

Challenges remain for white scholars using CRT. Although some have suggested that interest convergence hampers white researchers (Taylor, 1998), others have suggested that white scholars can commit to CRT and understand the costs to their own racial privilege (Bell, 1995). As a middle-class white woman, I acknowledge that my positionality will not allow me to engage with CRT as would a person of color. Bergerson (2003) identified three ways in which white researchers can use CRT without imposing whiteness on the work. First, white researchers should not speak for people of color; instead, white researchers should challenge race and racism through questions about neutrality, colorblindness, meritocracy, and other master narratives.

Second, white researchers can use CRT to conceptualize and research race but should not interpret racialized experiences. Third, white researchers should reference CRT literature in their work. I based my engagement with CRT in this study on these three recommendations.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to analyze how issues of racism and neoliberal capitalism are reinforced or rejected, consciously and unconsciously, in NLP's organizational structure and news literacy educational curriculum, and CPEoC, curriculum theory, and CRT were used as the theoretical frameworks.

This chapter introduced critical theory, which is foundational to understanding all critical theories, even those that diverge or critique it. Critical theory in the vein of the Frankfurt School, Gramsci, and Althusser in the context of this research informs CPEoC, curriculum theory, and CRT. Critical theory grounds the epistemological and ontological orientation for this study and sets out foundational ideas, including ideology, hegemony, ISAs, and culture industries, which are essential for situating this research. The purpose, goals, and assumptions of CPEoC, its origins and early scholars, various approaches and areas of research, and common characteristics of this research were also discussed. In this research, CPEoC was one tool for understanding how power functions in NLP's news literacy and was used define the organization and the context in which its news literacy curricular materials are created.

The two next sections introduced curriculum theory and CRT, which were used for critical analyses of NLP's news literacy curriculum. The goals and history of curriculum theory were presented followed by discussion of the neo-Marxist approach to curriculum theory, which focuses on the ideological role of education as an ISA. Neo-Marxist curriculum theory provides a framework for close analysis of neoliberal capitalism and has emancipatory goals while

accepting that education is complex, variable, and dynamic with various influences. CRT was used to frame the analysis of ideologies of racism in NLP's news literacy curriculum in this study. CRT posits that social constructions, specifically race, have material consequences, and this frame allows scholars to examine implicit and explicit functions of race and racism in all aspects of American life; in this study, the focus was education and media. The history, general tenets, and criticisms of CRT were discussed, and the established role of CRT in educational research MLE research was reviewed. The chapter closed by addressing how these theories contrast and complement each other and how they contributed to this research.

CHAPTER IV

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter covers the methodological framework used in this project, addresses the relationship between theory and method by outlining epistemological orientations, reasoning, and methodological paradigms, and orients this study within those frameworks. The justification for the use of these methods, implementation procedures, and some associated constraints are described.

Theory and Method: Epistemologies, Reasoning, and Methodology

Three epistemological orientations were identified and outlined by Deacon et al. (1999): positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism. Positivism is a structured and scientific approach to understanding the social world through cause-and-effect relationships. Positivists understand truth to be absolute and discoverable and rely on objectivity to discover truth; a researcher takes on the role of the disinterested scientist in pursuit of knowledge. A controlled experiment is an example method of this epistemological approach.

Interpretivism is a way of understanding the social world through the experiences and interactions of people. Interpretivists reject the notion of absolute truth because truth is understood as an outcome of the actions, interactions, and experiences that individuals encounter in their lives. This orientation rejects objectivity; because of the influence of individual experiences on one's understanding of truth and reality, objectivity cannot exist and is not pursued or expected. Instead, subjectivity is accepted and valued. An interpretivist researcher plays the role of a coproducer of knowledge through methods such as participant observation,

which allows the researcher to create knowledge alongside observed participants through shared experiences and interactions.

Critical realism is a way of understanding the social world by acknowledging that the social world is transformed and produced through everyday experiences as social structures influence how people act in and interact with the world. That is, critical realism rejects an absolute truth while acknowledging that people are not totally free to construct truth because of the constraints of society and culture. Critical realists acknowledge that power, history, and context are embedded in social structures that constrain and influence how people can engage with their world, and subjectivity is understood and accepted in such research. Because of their attention to power and structures, a critical realist often takes the role of an activist researcher who works to change the power structures they study. Document analysis and ethnographic methods allow researchers to understand both structural conditions and experiences within those structures.

The various approaches to reasoning also influence research. Deductive reasoning starts with examination of the existing literature (Shoemaker et al., 2004). A hypothesis is then developed based on previous findings, data are collected and analyzed, the hypothesis is tested, and the findings are added to the literature. Conversely, inductive reasoning begins with a phenomenon (Shoemaker et al., 2004). Research questions are then developed, and the researchers look for patterns and generalizations in the data and report their findings from this nuanced context.

From epistemologies and reasoning comes methodology. Quantitative and qualitative methods are the two prevailing orientations in formal Western research. Quantitative methods are systematic and scientific approaches to understanding phenomena and include statistical

analyses of measurements and numerical data to draw conclusions about the world (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Quantitative methods posit that social concepts can be quantified or measured and that findings from a sample can be generalized to a population. Quantitative methods, such as surveys, experiments, and content analyses address questions of cause and effect, correlation, and frequency. Thus, quantitative methods in most cases align with deductive reasoning and positivism.

Qualitative methods are used to understand practices and performances in the social world through nonnumerical descriptive data and are best suited to answer three general questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011): What is going on in this situation? How would this change based on who was doing it where and when? How do those involved in this context understand and explain what is going on? Some qualitative methods include participant observation, focus groups, and interviews.

Quantitative and qualitative methods can be used to study the same phenomenon; however, the same phenomenon may then be understood in different ways, and different questions about it can be answered. According to McCracken (1988), quantitative methods are used to address generalizability, whereas qualitative methods are used to understand nuance. A researcher must determine whether generalization or nuance will answer the research questions.

When planning research, researchers must understand their epistemological orientations and logical reasoning first because those elements will drive the kinds of questions that are developed, and the questions should drive the method used. This research was aligned with the critical realists (Deacon et al., 1999). Issues of power and structures—such as media, education, race, and capital—are understood as having real implications for people's lived experiences.

Because of this, this study included consideration of context and its nuances, so the research questions that were developed were explored through qualitative methods.

Methods

This section describes the organization analyzed in this study, the methods used, and how these methods were applied and supported answering each research question.

Case Study: NLP

Case studies can be used to understand a specific phenomenon in a specific context, time, and place (Lancy, 2001). They are useful to understand practices, policies, innovations, and interventions. Because this study was conducted to examine specific phenomena (ideologies of neoliberal capitalism and racism) in a specific context (a news literacy educational nonprofit organization), a case study is appropriate.

NLP, founded in 2008 by journalist Alan C. Miller through a John S. and James L. Knight Foundation grant, is a nonpartisan nonprofit educational organization that focuses on news literacy education as its mission, with an emphasis on the standards of professional journalism, the First Amendment, and misinformation. NLP's goal is to get news literacy into every middle and high school classroom (News Literacy Project, 2021e). NLP provides a slate of educational tools for both educators and students. Notable offerings include the Checkology® virtual classroom, NewsLitCamp® professional development, and *The Sift*® e-newsletter for educators. NLP's resources, such as Checkology®, educational consulting, and professional development, are available globally; the strategic framework for 2018–22 includes large-scale increases in audiences, platoform users, and resource development (News Literacy Project, 2021h).

Document Analysis

This study was approached through critical realism, accepting that people construct their

social worlds while being impacted consciously and unconsciously by social and cultural

structures (Deacon et al., 1999). Therefore, the context and constructs of one cultural structure

and its products were examined to answer the first research question: What is News Literacy

Project's political economic structure?

Document analysis was used to answer this research question. Document analysis helps

to clarify structure and context. This method requires collecting, reading, and interpreting

documents, material culture, and texts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). A text is anything from which

we can draw meaning (McKee, 2003). This broad definition acknowledges the variety of texts

and documents that were useful for understanding how NLP has explicated its version of media

literacy and developed media literacy resources. Scott (1990) provided four criteria for document

selection and analysis: meaning, authenticity, representativeness, and credibility. Meaning helps

a researcher get a sense of what is being studied and what it can help them understand.

Authenticity asks the researcher to determine the source of the document. Representativeness

encourages the researcher to consider whether the document is typical of others like it and the

implications when it is determined to be atypical. Credibility asks whether the document is

complete and without error. These criteria were used as guides for selecting and analyzing

documents for this study.

Document Analysis for Critical Political Economy

CPEoC is not a method but an approach to inquiry with diverse research questions and

approaches to socioeconomic critiques of capitalism and culture. CPEoC research can use many

methods (see Meehan & Wasko, 2013). In this research, the primary method used to build the

political economy of NLP was document analysis, aligning with Deacon et al.'s (1999) approach to analyzing organizational power through documents. The documents examined were organization reports, promotional materials, federal tax forms, social media, mobile applications, websites, email communications, curriculum, and training materials. Mapping the networks that illustrate power in NLP required some overarching questions to frame the analysis of these documents: Where is and power located and where is it not? Who has power and who does not? How does power flow, and where does it stagnate? How does power shape or not shape the organization and its cultural products? These questions were addressed through four areas in which power is visible and active: history, economics, politics, and culture.

When building a critical political economy, a historical analysis helps to uncover the conditions under which the organization was created, including what was going on for the individuals involved and the broader social context at the time. Historical analyses set the scene, draw connections to the past, and illuminate how an organization arrived at its present form; they provide the origin stories. Answers to the following questions were central to this historical analysis: Where did NLP come from? What were the circumstances that resulted in its development? What were the social conditions when it began? What social and historical conditions shaped it as it grew? What influenced it over time?

Economic and financial analyses provide information about an organization's relation to capital and its finances; they illuminate how an organization operates, including its costs and its reach. Questions of capital and its flow were used to develop the economic analysis: Where does NLP get its capital? How much capital does it work with? How does it use its capital? Who are its laborers? These questions lead directly into political analysis.

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Political analyses address issues of power through people, including an organization's values, leadership, connections to industry, governmental and social relations, and corporate social responsibility. The following research questions were used to develop the political analysis of NLP: Who leads NLP? What relationships exist between NLP and related industries through staff members, boards of directors, and national leadership councils? What relationships does NLP have with state or government entities? Who benefits from associating with NLP?

Although historical, economic, and political analyses addressed the organization itself, for a complete critical political economic analysis the cultural products created by NLP had to be considered. How does NLP define news literacy, its organizing concept? What components, products, and services does NLP produce? What is the relationship of these cultural products to mass media and social media? What is the reach of these cultural products?

Although the analyses of the history, economy and finances, politics, and cultural products built out a robust political economy of NLP, these analyses were not sufficient to answer all the research questions. The second and third research questions, regarding how and in what ways NLP's news literacy curriculum challenges and reinforces ideologies of neoliberal capitalism and racism, required closer reading and critical analysis of the cultural products NLP has created. This led to analysis of NLP's main curricular offering, Checkology®. The next section explains the use of critical curriculum analysis with curriculum theory and CRT frameworks to answer these research questions.

Curriculum Analysis

Traditional achievement-based approaches to curriculum analysis focus on products and product thinking, meaning that curricula are analyzed based on so-called objective measures (e.g., test scores) to evaluate efficacy in achieving learning objectives and goals. However, this

approach fails to consider the ideologies and values embedded in a curriculum (Apple & Beyer, 1983). Curricula may appear neutral but are developed by people in historical and material contexts that must be considered in curriculum analysis (Posner, 1992). Because of its principal goal of shaping people (i.e., students), a curriculum must also be understood as political and moral text (Apple, 2004). This research was intended to examine issues of power—specifically where and how ideologies of neoliberal capitalism and racism are perpetuated or challenged in MLE—and thus did not use a traditional Taylorist method of curriculum analysis predicated on how well a curriculum works, which ignores the basic question of power. Because the goal of this study was to identify ideologies and values in the curriculum, critical approaches were used to identify problem areas (Apple, 2004).

Critical curriculum analysis starts with contextualizing the curriculum: "It needs to situate the knowledge … within the real social conditions" (Apple, 2004, p. 11). In other words, a critical curriculum analysis must consider the historical, political, economic, ideological, and cultural conditions under which the curriculum was produced. Through relational analysis, critical curriculum analysis is not a neutral endeavor. Alleged neutral traditions that do not question the "latent social effects of the curricula" (Apple & Beyer, 1983, p. 427) reproduce and legitimize inequality and power structures, whereas a critical curriculum analysis seeks to make those latent social effects, ideologies, and economics visible with the goal of social and economic justice (Apple, 2004; Apple & Beyer, 1983). Drawing on the functions of the educational apparatus to study curriculum provides a deeper understanding of what is going on in curriculum and education (Apple & Beyer, 1983).

Critical curriculum analysis can address two major areas: content and form (Apple, 1982). Content refers to the material contained in the curriculum. Apple (1982) provided two

organizing questions for examining content: What is there? What is missing? The second area,

form, addresses how the curriculum is constructed. Apple's (1982) also provided foundational

questions about form: How is the curriculum put together? What is going on in the organization

of knowledge itself? What ideology is encoded in the materials? These questions were the

baselines for inquiry in this study.

The curricular texts analyzed in this research were the Checkology® 101 lessons.

Checkology® provides teachers the option to assign Checkology® 101, the default courses

prepared by NLP. Checkology® 101 for the middle school level has eight lessons and six

supplemental activities, and for high school and higher education levels has seven lessons and

six supplemental activities. Each of the two default courses has slightly different learning

objectives. (See Chapter VI for lists of lessons and learning objectives.) The Checkology® 101

lessons were analyzed first using a curriculum theory lens and then using a CRT lens. In each

case, the lessons were read and analyzed as texts. Using questions derived from each framework,

the audio, visual, textual, and organizational elements of the lessons were read multiple times

and coded for patterns and emergent themes. This included looking for implicit and explicit

messages and excluded content.

Critical Curriculum Analysis Using Curriculum Theory

Various assumptions and questions must be addressed in a critical curriculum analysis

framed by curriculum theory. One assumption is that social institutions are not equal in the way

they are organized or controlled, and curricular programs likely work to benefit the elite class

(Apple & Beyer, 1983). Another is the understanding that curricula include both overt *and* covert

lessons, which means that both what is taught explicitly and what is taught implicitly must be

considered (Apple, 2004). A curriculum analysis based on neo-Marxist curriculum theory also

assumes that knowledge is political, meaning that purposeful choices were made about whose knowledge is being legitimated, why ideas are being taught the way they are, and how this serves existing power (Apple, 1982). This study did not address how day-to-day meaning making and learning occurs, but the groundwork was laid for future inquiry.

The first critical analysis in this study was based on a curriculum theory framework from Apple's (1986) work and guiding questions: "Who benefits? In what ways? How are relations of domination and subordination reproduced and challenged in existing cultural, political, and economic forms of interaction?" (p. 14). Using curriculum theory for this analysis also enabled questions of ideology, including "what ideological commitments are embedded within the overt curriculum" (Apple, 2004, p. 20) and the covert curriculum. Critical analyses engage political questions such as "Whose knowledge is it? Who selected it? Why is it organized and taught in this way? To this particular group?" (Apple, 2004, p. 6) and "Whose vision of economic, racial, and sexual reality … are embedded in the content of schooling?" (p. 148). These questions guided the reading and analysis in this research that distilled and illuminated the presence of neoliberal capitalism ideology in the Checkology® 101 lessons to respond to RQ$_2$.

Critical Curriculum Analysis Using CRT

CRT is not bound to specific methods (Gillborn, 2006), and scholars commonly modify methods used with CRT in educational research (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In the second critical curriculum analysis of this study, questions for inquiry were based on CRT's core tenets: that racism is endemic to American society (Gillborn, 2006), that liberalism upholds racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), that race is a social construction (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), that experiential knowledge is necessary to understand racism in the United States (Matsuda et al.,

1993), and that CRT is interdisciplinary in its pursuit and emancipatory in its aims (Matsuda et al., 1993).

The questions for inquiry guided the critical curriculum analysis to address RQ$_3$ included: Where is racism built into the curriculum through inclusion *and* exclusion? What master narratives are used or challenged in this curriculum? How are racist ideologies upheld explicitly or implicitly through liberal ideals, including neutrality, objectivity, bias, universalism, meritocracy, and colorblindness? Where does the curriculum include or exclude context? Where are people of color's voices included or excluded? Do those voices tell their own stories or does storytelling reflect white normativity? How is race constructed in the curriculum? Where is whiteness accepted as the default?

White scholars using CRT can present challenges. My positionality as a middle-class white woman prevents me from applying CRT in the same way as would a person of color. For this analysis, I used Bergerson's (2003) recommendations for how white researchers can use CRT without imposing whiteness on the work. I did not speak for people of color; instead, I challenged race and racism through questions about neutrality, colorblindness, meritocracy, and other master narratives. I used CRT to conceptualize and research race but did not interpret racialized experiences of others. I also referenced and relied on CRT literature as a framework for analysis. I acknowledge that my work in CRT will always be imperfect and incomplete.

Methodological Constraints of This Research

This study had several methodological constraints. One constraint was the evaluation of only one MLE resource producer. Although NLP is arguably one of the largest and most notable producers of news literacy education resources, especially considering its notable growth during the COVID-19 pandemic, many others exist but were not included. Therefore, these findings

cannot be used to make generalizable claims. However, the study's approach and findings can be used as a starting point or justification to explore other media literacy organizations and their curricula.

Two methods were used in this study: document analysis and curriculum analysis. The original plan was to conduct interviews with NLP staff members to better understand NLP's organization, politics, and decision making. Ideally, these interviews would have shed light on the choices that went into the design and writing of the curriculum. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval and securing funding to compensate participants for their time, seven NLP staff members were contacted with the following Twitter message on January 4, 2021:

> Hi <name>,
> I'm Rachel Guldin, and I'm a PhD candidate in Media Studies at the University of Oregon. My research focuses on media literacy education, and I was wondering if I could interview you for my dissertation project. I'd like to interview folks from News Literacy Project to understand how neoliberalism and race function in news literacy education. My research will contribute to ongoing efforts to support media literacy education in the United States. I'm conducting interviews via Zoom that will last approximately 60 minutes and can be scheduled at your convenience. You and all participants will be compensated with a $30 e-gift card to Starbucks or Barnes & Noble. Can I answer any questions for you or schedule a time for an interview?
> I look forward to hearing from you.
> Take care,
> Rachel

Of the seven staff members contacted, only CEO Alan Miller responded "Certainly" with instructions to contact his administrative assistant to schedule time with him and then to contact Mike Webb (Senior Vice President of Communications) to connect with others at NLP. Both Eryn Busch, Special Assistant to the Founder & CEO, and Webb were contacted in January 2021.

After delayed responses due to News Literacy Week (which occurred in late January 2021), both Webb and Busch responded in February 2021. Webb replied first:

I know that you reached out to several staff members and I've spoken with them and the consensus was that we would not be able to help you with this project. I appreciate your interest and wish you good luck with your dissertation. (M. Webb, personal communication, February 8, 2021)

The response that no one was willing to participate was unanticipated. A follow-up email was sent to better understand this response, asking Webb whether any particular factors or reasons prompted the staff members to decline participation, including time of year, length of interview, compensation, interview topic, or manner of recruitment. Webb replied:

Nothing in particular, Rachel. People either didn't have the time or weren't sure they'd be able to add anything useful for your inquiry. And if it's not something that's advancing our work, I don't push the staff to do these types of interviews and leave it up to them. Sorry there were no takers. (M. Webb, personal communication, February 8, 2021)

It is unfortunate that this research was not able to include interviews, but also, based on Webb's email, that this research on NLP was not viewed as something that would advance news literacy. A few days later, Miller's assistant Eryn Busch responded:

After some consideration and some new complications with Alan's time, he's going to regretfully decline this interview. We wish you well in your very interesting research and hope all is well. (E. Busch, personal communication, February 10, 2021)

That message made it clear that interviews would not be a component of this study.

It was anticipated that some staff members might not participate. This research topic may have limited who felt comfortable participating and how much they were willing to share. Lack of participation may also have resulted from organizational silence, when staff members do not feel comfortable speaking about their place of employment (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), or a culture of secrecy, when organizations restrict what employees may speak about publicly (O'Donnell, 2014). However, it was not expected that all the staff would decline. During initial planning phases, NLP's Director of Communication, Carol McCarthy, was contacted for support in locating teachers who use NLP in Oregon, and she emailed a list of names and contact

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information (C. McCarthy, personal communication, June 20, 2019). Although that specific research idea was ultimately not pursued, the willingness to share internal information seemed to suggest that NLP staff might be willing to participate and share information in other ways, such as interviews.

Without interviews, this study was limited in the kind of information that could be analyzed. The primary goal for the interviews was to capture insights from NLP staff members about the choices, planning, and processes within the organization and during the production of news literacy educational resources. A second goal was to request from participants internal documents that might not be available publicly but would support the research. Without interviews to develop rapport with staff members, acquisition of internal documents was not pursued, and the analyses relied on publicly available documents. The publicly available documents were still useful, adequate, and acceptable for answering the research questions.

This study did not include teacher or student participants; it addressed NLP as an organization and the curriculum it produces rather than also addressing how these resources are used or who is using them. One criticism of this study could be that educational resources do not have much impact until they are used, and this study to explore their use in classrooms. However, NLP's organizational structure, influences under which its materials were created, and the content of the curriculum were examined.

Conclusion

This chapter included a description of and justification for the methodological framework used. The relationship between theory and method was described by outlining epistemological orientations, reasoning, and methodological paradigms. The orientation of the study within those frameworks was critical realism, and inductive reasoning and qualitative methods were used to

answer the research questions. Document analysis and critical curriculum analysis methods were

used to help answer the research questions, and the sets of guiding questions were used to

operationalize the methods within the theoretical frameworks. Some methodological constraints

of the study were also acknowledged.

CHAPTER V

CRITICAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NLP

> We think of news literacy as nothing less than literacy for the 21st century.
> —Alan C. Miller, Founder and CEO of NLP

Introduction

CPEoC allows scholars to understand how power operates in and through societal, organization, and cultural relations and structures by analyzing ownership, capital, and resource allocation in capitalist societies (Golding & Murdock, 1979; Mosco, 2009; Wasko, 2005). CPEoC accepts that communication and mass media, as cultural products situated within broader social systems, construct social meaning culturally and materially (McChesney, 1998; Mosco, 2009). The purpose of this chapter is to build a political economy of NLP that will clarify its organization and context as a news literacy education nonprofit organization in late-stage neoliberal capitalist America.

A political economy of NLP was built by examining the organization across four areas. The historical analysis of NLP included the organization's mission, vision, branding, origin story, evolution, awards, and recognitions. The economic and financial analyses of NLP were conducted through examination of its organizational structure, strategic framework, funding sources, expenses, and revenue. The political analysis of NLP included its values, leadership, labor force, media partners, government and social relations, and corporate social responsibility. Analysis of NLP's cultural products included the resources and services that NLP creates and provides, its media, global reach, and public critique and criticism. Conclusions about NLP were then drawn from these historical, economic, political, and cultural analyses.

Historical Analysis

In 2006, Alan C. Miller visited Thomas W. Pyle Middle School in Bethesda, Maryland to talk to 175 middle schoolers about journalism; he claims this was the birth of news literacy (News Literacy Project, 2019d). In recounting the founding story of NLP, Miller has expressed that 2006 was the inflexion point for digital technology proliferation, and he worried about future readers not seeking quality news sources and credible information. A former Pulitzer Prize–winning investigative journalist for *The Los Angeles Times*, Miller turned to the industry for a solution: "the thought occurred to me that if a lot of journalists brought their expertise and experience to bear in America's classrooms, it could really have a significant impact" (News Literacy Project, 2019d). By February 2008, Miller founded NLP through a $250,000 grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (News Literacy Project, 2019a), and by November 2008, *The New York Times* became NLP's first participating news organization (News Literacy Project, 2019a). NLP closed out its first year with 55 participating members of the news media, including nationally known journalists (News Literacy Project, 2008b).

NLP experienced quick growth through relationships with high-profile journalists, mainstream news outlets, and charter schools. In February 2009, NLP's launch event for its in-classroom pilot program—five lessons and a summative assessment—was hosted by then-NLP board member and CNN reporter Soledad O'Brien at Williamsburg Collegiate Charter School in Brooklyn, and *The New York Times* reporter David Gonzalez taught the first lesson (News Literacy Project, 2019b). By September 2009, NLP had partnered with over 150 media professionals and 15 media organizations, including Bloomberg, The Associated Press, NPR, and *The Washington Post* (News Literacy Project, 2009). One month later, NLP piloted its

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program in Chicago featuring Clarence Page of *The Chicago Tribune* (News Literacy Project, 2019a).

NLP received independent 501(c)(3) status in April 2011 (News Literacy Project, 2019a) and was officially declared a tax-exempt educational nonprofit organization. That same month, NLP expanded their educational offerings into the digital realm with their first online news literacy conference for students, supported by in-kind gifts from Skype (News Literacy Project, 2011b). In September 2011, NLP expanded their programmatic reach to Washington, D.C. This expansion was financially sponsored by multinational technology corporation Qualcomm, Inc., and included a kick-off event at E. L. Haynes Public Charter School with featured speakers Gwen Ifill of *PBS News Hour* and FCC Commissioner Michael Copps (News Literacy Project, 2011c).

NLP continued to progress quickly through digital expansion and corporate support. In March 2012, it piloted in Chicago its digital program, what is now the Checkology® virtual classroom (News Literacy Project, 2019a). In January 2013, Bloomberg sponsored NLP's after school programs in New York City and Washington, D.C. that brought Bloomberg journalists to work with students (News Literacy Project, 2013). Approximately100 teachers and 6,800 students in 82 schools across Chicago, New York City, and Washington, D.C. participated with NLP during the 2013–14 academic year (News Literacy Project, 2019b). NLP's expansion continued with the Houston metro area in early 2015 and its first series of online professional developments for educators nationwide (News Literacy Project, 2019a). But in 2016 the news literacy game changed radically.

May 2016 ushered in the official introduction of Checkology®, NLP's virtual classroom (News Literacy Project, 2019b). NLP reached students in four states before the introduction of its

digital platform, but two months after the debut of Checkology® it was already being used in 22 states (News Literacy Project, 2019b). The year 2016 brought an intense presidential primary, the election of Donald Trump, and the crisis of "fake news" that followed in its wake. The syzygy of Trump's election and the introduction of Checkology® catapulted NLP to relevance and allowed the organization to capitalize on concerns about fake news. As Miller put it, "it really felt like, you know, we went from being a kind of voice in the wilderness to an answer to a prayer" (News Literacy Project, 2019d).

As the clamber around fake news hit a national fever pitch, NLP rolled out its first NewsLitCamp® in partnership with *The Chicago Sun-Tribune* in Chicago public schools and followed soon after with *The Sift*©, a weekly e-newsletter for news literacy educators (News Literacy Project, 2019a). In May 2018, NLP launched an updated webpage with publicly available resources and sold its first Checkology® Premium license; the first four lessons were free, but the final nine lessons were paywalled (News Literacy Project, 2019a). By August 2018, Checkology® got its first update and expansion (News Literacy Project, 2019a).

The Knight Foundation awarded NLP a $5 million grant in February 2019, and in March 2019, Apple also gave NLP financial support, although the amount is not publicly available (News Literacy Project, 2019a). Later that year, NLP released Newsroom to Classroom, a program for teachers to request in-person and virtual visits from professional journalists, and Informable, their mobile app that gamifies news literacy skills (News Literacy Project, 2019a, 2019g). In early 2020, NLP kicked off its inaugural News Literacy Week in partnership with broadcasting business The E.W. Scripps Company to bring news literacy awareness from the classroom to the public (News Literacy Project, 2020d). News Literacy Week was the last week

in January, only about six weeks before the United States shut down for the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought global disruptions to all sectors of human life: social, economic, political, and educational. This underscored the challenges surrounding information in a modern, mediated pandemic. The World Health Organization declared an infodemic, which is a portmanteau of "information" and "pandemic," and refers to the glut of accurate and inaccurate information transmitted through regulated and unregulated channels as information about the virus changed rapidly, resulting in rampant misinformation and disinformation.

To ameliorate the effects of the infodemic, NLP positioned itself as an information expert by doing media interviews with major news outlets and developing COVID-specific resources. In response to the March 2020 lockdowns and shifts to remote education in primary and secondary schools, NLP removed the Checkology® paywall for educators and parents to access resources for remote schooling and homeschooling (News Literacy Project, 2020b, 2021h). In August 2020, as lockdowns and remote and hybrid instruction continued into the new school year, NLP made the Checkology® platform and all its lessons free and fully accessible for educators, parents, students, and school districts (News Literacy Project, 2021n), which resulted in 2,018 new teacher and 16,789 student enrollments (News Literacy Project, 2019c). Some of NLP's additional COVID-related responses included the creation of a COVID-19 information webpage, addressing COVID-19 in weekly e-newsletters, developing COVID-19 resources for teachers and the public, collaborating with the Metcalfe Institute at the University of Rhode Island to host a free four-part news literacy and science communication webinar, and increased website traffic (News Literacy Project, 2019c).

As the United States began reopening in 2021, NLP continued its expansion. In January, NLP introduced NewsLit Nation, its online educator network. This network is meant to provide resources to educators and enable local organizing in support of news literacy education inclusion in schools (News Literacy Project, 2021k). As of October 2021, NewsLit Nation members could get a free subscription to the learning platform The Juice, discounted subscriptions to News Corp-owned publications *The Wall Street Journal* and *Barron's*, and chances to win Amazon gift cards by interacting with NLP on social media (M. Romais, personal communication, October 24, 2021).

During its development and growth, NLP garnered national recognition and awards. In addition to winning financial support from grants and foundations, NLP's Checkology® won the Silver Award in News/Media Literacy for the 2019 Global Youth & News Prize (News Literacy Project, 2019e) and the 2019 Spotlight on Digital Wellbeing award from HundrED (News Literacy Project, 2019f). In 2021, NLP and Checkology® were named Best Digital Tools for Teaching & Learning by the American Association of School Librarians (News Literacy Project, 2021m). In late 2021, AARP announced that Miller had won their 2022 Purpose Prize® for his work with NLP (News Literacy Project, 2021p).

NLP has grown dramatically since its inception in 2006 during Miller's visit to a middle school. The organization has moved from offering localized, in-person classroom and after school engagements with staff and volunteer journalists to an online and subscription-based curriculum, to a free virtual classroom and national network. All the while, NLP has positioned its organization and staff as news and information experts and has increased its public presence and supremacy in this realm.

Economic and Financial Analysis

NLP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit producer of news literacy education resources and services. It is a publicly supported organization, meaning that NLP receives most of its funding—over 72% from 2015 to 2019—from the public (News Literacy Project, 2019c). As a 501(c)(3) organization, it also reports no spending on lobbying or political campaigns. Although descriptors such as "nonpartisan" and "nonprofit" may initially make economic and financial structures seem relatively straightforward, a deeper examination of NLP's economy and finances is needed for a deeper understanding of the organization's resources.

Strategic Framework

Branded as "the nation's leading provider of news literacy education" (News Literacy Project, 2020c, p. 5), NLP reported that its most significant activity is "to foster appreciation of the value of quality journalism for middle and high school students" (News Literacy Project, 2019c, p. 1). Its mission echoes this, stating that NLP "empowers educators to teach students the skills they need to become smart, active consumers of news and other information and engaged, informed participants in our democracy" (News Literacy Project, 2020a, p. 2). Its vision statement declares that NLP is working toward a future in which news literacy is embedded in the American education experience and people of all ages and backgrounds know how to identify credible news and other information, empowering them to have an equal opportunity to participate in the civic life of their communities and the country (News Literacy Project, 2020b, p. 4).

In its simplest slogans, NLP wants to "give facts a fighting chance" (News Literacy Project, 2020a, p. 6) through a "future founded on facts" (News Literacy Project, 2020c, p. 20). To distill the role it plays and the gap it fills, NLP outlined a "theory of change" (News Literacy

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Project, 2021h, p. 4) with a clear problem and solution. The problem, as identified by NLP, is that democracy is threatened when citizens lack news literacy skills (News Literacy Project, 2021h). This concept is generally accepted across media literacy scholars and educators, but NLP, with language such as "people are vulnerable" and "people of all ages and backgrounds are susceptible to misinformation" (News Literacy Project, 2021h, p. 3), aligns with a protectionist approach to this issue. NLP's solution is teaching news literacy in U.S. education. What methods has NLP proposed to do this?

NLP's theory of change is presented as three *pillars*, the guiding themes and goals in their tripartite plan to solve the news literacy problem: "change behaviors of educators through training and appropriate teaching resources" (Pillar 1), "change the will of the education establishment through formation and activation of national news literacy practitioner community" (Pillar 2), and "raise awareness of NLP and increase news literacy among the general public" (Pillar 3) (News Literacy Project, 2021h, p. 4). To enact this solution, NLP defined four strategic plan pillars, of which the first three align with the theory-of-change pillars: strategic plan pillar 1 is to increase the use and measured impacts of NLP, strategic plan pillar 2 is to build a community of news literacy educators and advocates, and strategic plan pillar 3 is to increase the public's knowledge of news literacy and NLP (News Literacy Project, 2021h). Strategic plan pillar 4 is to establish and ensure financial stability to achieve the goals of the other three pillars (News Literacy Project, 2021h).

NLP's strategic framework outlines the metrics, goals, and strategies for meeting the goals of each strategic plan pillar. In other words, NLP defined steps and markers to indicate the accomplishment for each strategic plan pillar. For example, the metrics for Pillar 1—the area focused on changing educator behaviors—are the reach, user satisfaction, and demonstrated

effectiveness of curricular and professional development resources, including Checkology®, *The Sift*® e-newsletter, NewsLitCamp®, and customized professional development. Specifically, this means, high levels of comprehension and mastery in specific learning areas and high ratings from product users in areas like product satisfaction, likelihood for implementation, and comparisons to tools and platforms. NLP also identified strategies necessary to meet these goals, which include increased funding, promotional marketing, and user feedback.

Pillars 2, 3, and 4 have similar metrics, goals, and strategies. The Pillar 2 metrics—working toward changing the system—address on measuring participation. One NLP goal is to have 20,000 educators and 3 million middle and high school students using NLP tools to teach and learn news literacy. At least 25% of these users should be "active," although what counts as "active" was not clearly defined. Another NLP goal is for 5% of educators to participate in NLP events and 50% to report teaching and/or advocating for news literacy. Pillar 2 strategies are formative and include development of strategy and leadership. The metrics of changing the public mindset, which is addressed in Pillar 3, focus on increasing awareness, media coverage, website traffic, and the number of general audience users. The strategies to meet these goals include using media and other partners to amplify the presence of Miller and NLP, increasing digital outreach, and driving traffic to the NLP website. The metrics of Pillar 4, which focus on financial development to ensure the viability of Pillars 1–3, address capital growth, specifically meeting annual financial needs and establishing a funding reserve of at least $2 million. This issue of capital is addressed here in terms of funding, revenue, and expenses.

Revenue and Expenses

Funding: Gifts

Due their nonprofit status and the 2020 decision to make access to Checkology® free, NLP's funding comes primarily from gifts. NLP accepts monetary gifts in the form of direct giving (e.g., online donations and stocks) and indirect giving (e.g., employer matching and AmazonSmile online shopping). NLP also accepts in-kind donations of goods, equipment, and services. As a nonpartisan group that relies on gifts, NLP has a Gift Acceptance Policy that it "will not turn over control of its curriculum or the content of an event to a sponsor or partner" (News Literacy Project, 2018b, para. 5), and "when entering into such relationships, NLP staff should make it clear that we value input, advice and collaboration. But when it comes to curricular and content decisions, we require independence" (News Literacy Project, 2018b, para. 6). NLP also has stated that it reserves the right to reject or restrict terms associated with gifts. Thus, if funders do not have influence on the curriculum, NLP's core values and curriculum content must be appealing to potential funders.

The gifts that NLP receives come from three general groups with differing giving capacities and goals: funders and donors, sponsors, and partners. *Donors* are people or entities that give unrestricted gifts for use at the organization's discretion, and *funders* are the grants, foundations, or other entities that provide restricted or unrestricted funds (Saad & Shaw, 2020). For NLP, these categories include much of the gifts from individuals, funds, and foundations and some corporate giving. In contrast, *sponsors* provide funding with the understanding that they will receive exposure to NLP's audience (Saad & Shaw, 2020); for example, the Knight Foundation has sponsored NewsLitCamp®. *Partners* provide financial support and more; they help to shape events and projects and have more strategic input than donors, funders, or sponsors

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(Saad & Shaw, 2020). One example of a partnership is The E.W. Scripps Company, NLP's

partner for National News Literacy Week.

Like many organizations that rely on the donor cycle for funding, NLP's donor

recognition process acknowledges its high-level contributors as members of the Visionary Circle,

which is described as "a thriving group of philanthropic leaders who support the mission of the

News Literacy Project and enjoy exclusive benefits and access to NLP programs and leadership"

(News Literacy Project, 2020b, p. 15). The Visionary Circle is divided into giving levels with

public recognition and associated benefits relative to the size of the gift (see Table 1). Benefits

for the upper levels are not published, so it is unclear whether benefits max out at the mid-levels

or whether members in the higher giving tiers receive additional but undisclosed benefits.

Although NLP maintains its independence in curricular and content decisions, larger gifts result

in more access to NLP leadership.

In its June 2021 update,[3] NLP reported financial contributions from the previous 12

months coming from 58 foundations and funds, eight businesses, and 74 other donors (i.e.,

individuals and couples). NLP receives funding from private and family foundations, including

Porticus, The Argosy Foundation, and The Klarman Foundation. As of October 15, 2021, NLP

reported major gifts from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation—the same foundation that

provided startup funding in 2009—that fulfills part of the foundation's $5 million grant to extend

news literacy education programs (Tate, 2019). NLP is also the beneficiary of corporate

foundations, including the Dow Jones Foundation. Outside of their philanthropic foundations,

companies also give directly to NLP (see Table 2). During the same reporting period, eight

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[3] NLP updates the Supporters page on its website monthly. Thus, some information in this financial account is not currently listed on the Supporters page. The Wayback Machine, a project of Archive.org, provided intermittent records of NLP's Supporter page between December 2018 and October 2021 to corroborate this information.

companies provided financial support to NLP: Apple, SmartNews, Inc., News Corp, *The New York Times*, Axios Media Inc., Politics and Prose, Deloitte, and Grantham, Mayo, Van Otterloo & Co., LLC. (see Table 3). Individuals' and couples' giving ranged from $1,000 to $99,999. Of course, small gifts were likely given by many more people and other entities, but those gifts would not qualify for public acknowledgement.

Table 1

Visionary Circle Levels (from News Literary Project, 2021i, 2021q, as of February 2022)

Giving Level	Contribution Range	Benefits
Friends	$1,000–$2,4999	• Recognition on NLP website • Connect with NLP staff member • Receive NLP emails • Receive NLP-branded promotional items
Patrons	$2,5000–$4,999	• All Friends benefits plus: • Annual call with NLP executive leadership • Demonstration of Checkology®
Mentors	$5,000–$9,999	• All Publisher benefits plus: • Invitations to local NLP events • Invitation to NewsLitCamp®
Producers	$10,000–$24,999	• All Mentor benefits
Editors	$25,000–$49,999	• Invitation to exclusive event with board members, senior leaders, and journalists
Publishers	$50,000–$99,999	Not published
Principals	$100,000–$249,999	Not published
Investors	$250,000–$499,999	Not published
Champions	$500,000–$999,999	Not published
Pulitzers	≥$1,000,000	Not published

Table 2

Examples of NLP's Fund and Foundation Supporters (from News Literary Project, 2021q, as of June 2021)

Foundation or Fund	Philanthropy	Donation Amount
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation	American nonprofit foundation with grants for journalism, communities, and the arts	≥$1,000,000
Dow Jones Foundation	Philanthropy of News Corp's Dow Jones	≥$250,000
Porticus	Philanthropy of the Brenninkmeijer family, German billionaires in fashion, real estate, and banking	≥$250,000
The Argosy Foundation	Private family philanthropy of John Abele of Boston Scientific	≥$100,000
The Klarman Foundation	Philanthropy of billionaire hedge fund investors Seth and Beth Klarman of Baupost Group	≥$100,000

Table 3

Examples of NLP's Business Supporters (from News Literary Project, 2021q, as of June 2021)

Company	Industry	Donation Amount
Apple	Technology company	≥$1,000,000
SmartNews	Algorithm-driven news reader app	≥$100,000
News Corp	Mass media corporation	≥$50,000
The New York Times	Mass media company, newspaper publisher	≥$10,000
Axios Media, Inc.	Media company	≥$10,000
Politics and Prose	Independent bookstore	≥$5,000
Deloitte	Professional services company	≥$1,000
Grantham, Mayo, Van Otterloo & Co., LLC	Investment management firm	≥$1,000

NLP also reported receiving in-kind gifts of goods, equipment, and services from companies, foundations, and individuals. Of particular note are the media companies that supported NLP with in-kind gifts: telecommunications company Comcast; national and international news organizations National Public Radio, ProPublica, The Associated Press, The New York Times Company, The E.W. Scripps Company, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and Vox Media; regional and local newspapers *The*

Bangor Daily News, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Valley Breeze*, and The Day Publishing

Company; the private philanthropic foundation Foundations, Inc., and individuals Catherine and

Bill Miller, Robert and Sheri Rosenfeld, and Susan C. Fickling.

A challenge for understanding NLP's funding base is that their records are not accessible

beyond the information listed in their publicly available annual IRS-990 returns, which lists gifts

as aggregated sums, and their website's Supporters page, which shows contributors from only

the past 12 months and is updated with only some regularity. Therefore, comprehensive

information on past gifts, how much entities have given at once or over time, how funds were

allocated and used (i.e., restricted or unrestricted), and the types of in-kind goods and services

was not available. In response to an inquiry requesting further details on NLP's funding,

specifically its grant funders and corporate supporters and partners, Gina Physic, senior manager

of media relations, responded:

> News Literacy Project's financial information is publicly available on our website in the
> 990 forms, linked here toward the bottom of the page: https://newslit.org/newsroom/. I
> know you mentioned reviewing this information, but this is all that we can share. (G.
> Physic, personal communication, October 7, 2021)

Therefore, certain gaps in this financial account remain. Nevertheless, this is a valuable snapshot

of the contributors and contribution levels that support NLP.

This lack of full disclosure allows NLP to obscure past funding relationships. For

example, although Facebook has not yet been identified as one of NLP's corporate funders, the

Facebook Journalism Project partnered with NLP in 2017 through in-kind and monetary gifts to

develop global educator resources and social media public service announcements (Chaykowski,

2017; News Literacy Project, 2017a). Again in 2018 Facebook again provided support through

the Facebook Journalism Project to expand and improve NLP's virtual classroom, Checkology®

(Brown, 2018). Facebook has left a lasting footprint on NLP and its products, but its record of

financial and in-kind support is not readily accessible and is available only in archived press releases and the frontmatter and backmatter of published materials.

In October 2021, after Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen revealed more of the antidemocratic and dangerous actions that Facebook has taken in the name of profits, NLP released a public statement supporting Haugen. NLP acknowledged prior support from Facebook while also creating a safe distance with the following disclaimer: "Note: The News Literacy Project received funding from the Facebook Journalism Project in 2017, and the work was completed in 2019. NLP has received no other funding from Facebook" (News Literacy Project, 2021o, para. 12). Although this press release is an important acknowledgment, without this whistleblower scenario necessitating a public statement the influence of Facebook would have been virtually invisible in NLP's public-facing documents. And although Facebook might be the most well-known and dramatic example, it may not be the only company or organization whose funding relationship with NLP has been obscured.

Funding: Professional Development and Global Education

In addition to donation-based monetary and in-kind gifts, NLP also uses professional development and global education as a revenue stream (News Literacy Project, 2021h). Domestic professional development is available in person or online (News Literacy Project, 2021b). In-person sessions cost $1,750 for a three-hour or half-day training and $2,500 for a six-hour or full-day training. Virtual trainings of the same length are $500 and $1,000, respectively. NLP also customizes training aspects, such as duration and topic, based on client needs.

NLP's mission, goals, and focus are on providing news literacy support in the United States, so international support has associated fees. One service NLP has provided to international clients is consulting and training (News Literacy Project, 2019b). Consulting starts

at $1,000 for a minimum of four hours and $250 per hour after that. The second service is platform creation (News Literacy Project, 2019b). Although NLP restricts the translation of Checkology®, it provides the option to build or re-create a version of Checkology® for other national contexts. In six to nine months, NLP can create a country-specific version of the Checkology® platform for $300,000–$500,000. This fee includes no maintenance or web hosting, and all additional trainings or platform updates are add-on options. The client owns the final platform, but it is subject to NLP branding. If a client prefers to build their own virtual classroom based on Checkology®, they can purchase a $50,000 license and 50 hours of consulting. After the first year, license renewal is $10,000 annually. In addition to the license, NLP and Checkology® must be acknowledged on the client's platform.

Budget: Revenue and Expenses

Review of an organization's budget can illuminate certain aspects of an organization, such size and annual growth or decline. But a budget is also a political document, and an understanding of how an organization uses their capital can illuminate their organizational priorities. In their most recent annual reports, NLP reported a breakdown of their budget, with revenues and expenses.

For fiscal year 2019, NLP reported a total revenue of $4,809,604 (see Table 4) and expenses of $3,560,734 (see Table 5), for an annual budget surplus of $1,248,870. The revenue came from philanthropic support, with just over two-thirds of NLP's net revenue funded by grants and contributions. When released donor funds are included in this number, grants and gifts accounted for nearly 99% of NLP's 2019 fiscal year net revenue. Fundraising costs in 2019 were $500,552, or approximately 14% of expenses. Overall, NLP fiscal year 2019 ended with a budget surplus budget of $1,248,870.

However, in 2020 expenses outpaced revenue for NLP, with $4,644,006 in total expenses

and $4,151,540 in total revenue, creating a $492,446 budget deficit. In the 2020 fiscal year, all

expenses except for educator services increased. At the same time, NLP also received more than

$2 million less in grants and contributions in fiscal year 2020 than in fiscal year 2019. When net

assets released from donor restrictions were factored in, that number shrank to about $1.6

million, a small but still notable decrease in funding.

Table 4

NLP FY2019 and FY2020 Revenue (from News Literacy Project, 2019a, 2020b)

Revenue	FY2019	FY2020	Difference
Grants and contributions	$3,237,354	$1,145,821	−$2,091,533
Net assets released from restrictions	$1,518,693	$2,007,911	$489,218
Program income	$108,980	$222,553	$113,573
Contributed services	$109,730	$749,713	$639,983
Investment income (loss)	−$69,250	−$25,542	$43,709
Loss on disposal of asset	−$95,903		$95,903

Table 5

NLP FY2019 and FY2020 Expenses (from News Literacy Project, 2019a, 2020b)

Expense	FY2019	FY2020	Difference
Program (education)	$867,434	$1,257,272	$389,838
Program (communication)	$708,117	$1,728,854	$1,020,737
Program (partnerships)	$91,154	$602,942	$511,788
Program (educator services)	$315,374	$256,646	−$58,728
Management, general	$566,315	$616,718	$50,403
Fundraising	$500,552	$693,362	$192,810

Program communication costs, program education costs, and program partnership costs

also increased greatly relative to the other areas of expenses, presumably due to impacts of

COVID-19, namely making Checkology® free and increasing the production and availability of COVID-19–related materials. (This explanation is speculative because NLP's publicly available financial reports did not address these increases.) Because NLP does not provide detailed financial information beyond what is available online and additional information was not accessible and could not be verified, assumptions must be made about the social context for any increased costs.

In NLP's projected budget was $4,900,000 for fiscal year 2021 in expenses and revenue, and $5,500,000 for fiscal year 2022 (News Literacy Project, 2021h). The strategic framework also set a goal of establishing a financial reserve of $2 million or more by 2022. Thus, NLP's finances are significant. By relying on grants, corporate funders, individual donors, and fees for domestic and international consulting services, NLP has built a multimillion-dollar budget in its decade of existence. In the next section, this research shifts from economic and financial analysis of NLP's flows of capital to a political analysis of NLP's flows of power.

<div align="center">**Political Analysis**</div>

To understand the political dimensions of NLP, it is necessary to understand its values; its leadership, including its board members, advisory council, and executive staff and their connections within and outside the industry; its labor force; its connections to industry; its governmental and social relations; and its role in corporate social responsibility.

Organizational Values

NLP has defined its values through belief statements and action statements. The belief statements include "news literacy is an essential life skill," "facts matter," and "a free press is a cornerstone of democracy" (News Literacy Project, 2021e, n.p.). These statements appear strong, almost common sense. However, their simplicity raises questions: What is news literacy? Who

gets to define it? Who gets included in teaching it? What type of news is considered credible, valuable, and reliable in this approach to news literacy? Facts matter—but whose facts? Critical lenses suggest that those who hold power shape the way facts are recorded, represented, relayed, and understood. The proposal that a free press is necessary for democracy (in a U.S. context) ignores the role capital plays in constraining news through media ownership and consolidation and the relationship between capital and the state via the owner class. In essence, this belief statement about the free press does not acknowledge the U.S. media system, in which news is situated, as an oligopoly (McChesney, 1999b) or the U.S. political system as one of biased pluralism (Gilens & Page, 2014) that favors elites and capital with oligarchic tendencies that oppose democracy.

NLP (2021e) identified four ways to "achieve what we believe" (n.p.): (a) innovation, meaning updating resources and approaches; (b) independence and nonpartisanship, meaning it identifies itself as "independent and rigorously nonpartisan" because its programs "teach people how to think, not what to think" (News Literacy Project, 2021e, n.p.); (c) inclusion and diversity, meaning having a diverse organization to produce more representative resources; and (d) collaboration, meaning inclusion of media partners and educators in developing news literacy educational resources. As for the belief statements, these broad statements bring gaps to the surface.

Although an organization may claim no affiliations with political parties, it may be aligned with power in other ways, such as the media partners with which it collaborates. Most of NLP's media relationships are with corporate news organizations, which challenges the notion of independence from politics because politics is the representation and organization of power. This becomes especially important considering that collaborating with media entities is one way NLP

realizes its organizational values. NLP's diversity, equity, and inclusion statement says, "we are committed to continually asking critical questions about the structures and systems within and outside our organization so that we can recognize and address barriers and strive toward a more equitable workplace and world" (News Literacy Project, 2021l, para. 4). This statement seems counter to NLP's reliance on professional, corporate news as media partners and the standard for credible news.

Leadership and Labor Force

The politics of an organization must be understood by looking at power: who holds it, who is affiliated with it, and what is done with it. This section contributes to the political analysis by examining NLP's board members, its national leadership council, its executive leadership team, its general staff, and its labor force.

Board of Directors

In a nonprofit organization, the role of the board of directors is governance through direction and oversight of the organization's mission, values, goals, and activities (McRay, 2014). NLP's board of directors grew from 10 independent board members in 2011 to its largest board of 17 independent members in 2018 (News Literacy Project, 2011a, 2018a). At the time of writing, NLP's board had16 total members, 15 of which were independent members, with expertise across five different industry domains: journalism and communication, law, business, education, and politics (see Table 6). At the time of writing, the board consisted of six members with journalism and news backgrounds. In related areas, the board included three business and strategic communications professionals. Other members had experience in law, business, and education (see Table 6). These domains illustrate the ties that NLP has to government and industry through its board of directors.

Table 6

NLP's Board of Directors (from the NLP Team & Careers Webpage, as of February 2022)

Name	Professional Experiences	Industry
Alan Miller	• CEO and Founder, NLP • Former investigative reporter, *The Los Angeles Times*	Journalism
Walt Mossberg	• Former technology journalist and editor, *The Wall Street Journal* • Former executive editor, *The Verge* • Former editor-at-large, *Re/Code*	Journalism
Enrique Acevedo	• Correspondent, *60 Minutes+* • Former anchor, Univision	Journalism
Abby Phillip	• Senior political correspondent and anchor, CNN's *Inside Politics Sunday* • Former reporter, *The Washington Post* • Former digital reporter, ABC News • Former reporter, *POLITICO*	Journalism
Greg McCaffery, Chairman	• Former chair, Bloomberg Bureau of National Affairs (now Bloomberg Industry Group)	Business news
Geraldine Baum	• Assistant Dean of External Affairs, CUNY Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism • Former journalist, *The Los Angeles Times* • Former journalist, *The Miami Herald*	Journalism, education
Tucker Eskew	• Founder, Vianovo • Former director of media affairs and global communication, George W. Bush White House • Former press secretary, South Carolina Gov. Carroll Campbell	Strategic and business communication, government
Whit Ayers	• Political consultant • Founder, North Star Opinion Research • 2012 Republican Pollster of the Year for the American Association of Political Consultants	Strategic and business communication, politics
Karen Wickre	• Former senior media liaison of global communications and public affairs, Google • Former editorial director, Twitter • Senior consultant, Brunswick Group	Strategic and business communication, media
Eva Haller	• Cofounder, Campaign Communications Institute of America • Philanthropist	Strategic and business communication

Table 6 (continued)

Name	Professional Experiences	Industry
Christina Van Tassell	• CFO, Dow Jones • Former CEO, Xasis • Former partner and CFO, Centurion Holdings	Media, business
Peter Kadzik	• Partner, Venable LLP	Corporate business law
Bridgett Price	• Global human resources officer for Brand, Marketing, Sales & Consumer Services and Information Technology, Marriott International • Ph.D. in educational leadership	Strategic and business communication
Molly Hill Patten	• Chief operating officer, Sitka • Various other business roles	Healthcare
Juliet Stipeche	• Vice president of sales, EBS Benefit Advisors • Former director of education, City of Houston	Insurance, government, education
Liz Ramos	• High school teacher	Education

National Leadership Council

In addition to the board of directors, NLP has a 21-member national leadership council (see Table 7). In nonprofit organizations, leadership councils are generally made up of area experts and members of the target community for the organization's services (Pagnoni, 2019). About three-quarters of NLP's national leadership council is affiliated with the media industry; these members are journalists, media executives, founders of major media organizations, and members of smaller media groups. The remaining members have roles and expertise in law, education, government, and healthcare.

The role of a leadership council is to engage area experts and members of the target community, and examination of this collection of members clarifies who NLP counts as experts in news literacy education and its vision of news literacy. Unlike the board of directors, the expertise in NLP's national leadership council is not spread across multiple areas; 16 seats on the

Table 7

NLP's National Leadership Council (from the NLP Team & Careers Webpage, as of February 2022)

Name	Professional Experiences	Industry
Kim Brizzolara	• Documentarian and film producer • Former journalist	Media
Alisyn Camerota	• CNN cohost • Former anchor, Fox News	Journalism
Betty Cohen	• Founder, Hearts & Minds Media • Founding president, Cartoon Network • Former CEO, Lifetime	Media
Edward Cohen	• Lecturer, University of Wisconsin–Madison • Former attorney	Law, education
Nelson Cunningham	• President, McLarty Associates	Business consulting
Charles W. Dent	• Executive director and vice president, Congressional Program, Aspen Institute • Former Republican congressman for Pennsylvania	Government consulting
James Ferrari	• CEO, Ferrari Media	Media
Matea Gold	• National political enterprise and investigations editor, *The Washington Post*	Media
Leslie Hill	• Former board member, Dow Jones & Co. • Member of the Bancroft family, former owners of *The Wall Street Journal*	Business, media
David Hiller	• Former president and CEO, Robert R. McCormick Foundation • Former publisher, *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Los Angeles Times*	Journalism
Bill Keller	• Former correspondent, columnist, and executive, *The New York Times* • Founder, The Marshall Project	Journalism
Tracie Potts	• Executive Director, Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College • Former national correspondent, NBC News	Journalism
Peter Sagal	• Host, NPR's *Wait… Don't Tell Me*	Media
Tanya Brara Shah	• Vice President, The Commonwealth Fund • Former assistant commissioner, NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene	Healthcare

Table 7 (continued)

Name	Professional Experiences	Industry
D. Archibald Smart	• Principal consultant, DKR Insights	Media
Linda Rothberg Stein	• Education and children's services advocate	Education, youth
Sheila Solomon	• Strategic alliance liaison and manager, Rivet	Media
Pierre Thomas	• Senior justice correspondent, ABC News	Journalism
Jim VandeHei	• Cofounder and CEO, Axios • Founder and former CEO, *POLITICO*	Media
Amy Wisenbach	• Senior vice president for marketing and media strategy, *The New York Times*	Media
Catherine Woodard	• Poet • Former journalist	Media

council are filled with members of the media industry (journalists, producers, executives, board members, or consultants), and the remaining seats are filled by an education advocate, a university lecturer, a business consultant, a government consultant, and a healthcare executive. No middle or high school educators, administrators, or scholars were on the council at the time of writing, even though teachers and students are the primary groups served by NLP. Thus, NLP appears to consider members of the media to be both experts and members of the target community.

Of course, media makers are experts at making media, but are they experts at media education or education at all? Or does this council give members of the media industry special access and influence to advise on news literacy education? The same can be asked of NLP's board of directors, which has significantly more media industry and business members and only high school teacher member. Although the board of directors and the national leadership council do not write NLP's curriculum or develop the classroom resources, they are responsible for advising and influencing the organization and acting as experts. The selection process and/or criteria for NLP's board of directors and national leadership council are not publicly available.

Executive Leadership

NLP began its status as a 501(c)(3) organization with eight employees in 2011 (News Literacy Project, 2011a). Eight years later, it had tripled its workforce, reporting 27 employees in 2019 (News Literacy Project, 2019c). Currently, NLP has eight members on its leadership team, including executive and vice president positions.

Alan C. Miller, founder and chief executive officer of NLP, leads the leadership team. He spent over 20 years in the industry as a political and investigative reporter with *The Times Union* in Albany, New York, *The Record* in Hackensack, New Jersey, and the Washington bureau of *The Los Angeles Times*, where he won a Pulitzer Prize. His colleague, Charles Salter, is president and chief operating officer. Salter has almost 20 years of experience in education as a teacher, president of the teacher's union, and executive leader of various education and youth organizations, including Lighthouse Academies charter schools, Teach For America California, New York, and Nevada, and BUILD, Inc.

NLP senior vice presidents are Peter Adams, Ebonee Rice, and Mike Webb. Adams, as senior vice president of education, leads the education team, which develops resources and teacher training. Adams has teaching experience in New York City with Teach For America, Chicago Public Schools, and two higher education institutions in Chicago. He also worked with nonprofit education organizations and as an education consultant. Rice, as senior vice president of Educator Network, leads educational partnerships and expanding and developing NLP's outreach to educators. Her experience is from community outreach and engagement roles in the Washington, D.C. Office of the State Superintendent of Education, the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, and the healthcare nonprofit organization Enroll America. Webb, as senior vice president of communications, supervises media and public relations,

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including interviews, speaking engagements, and NLP's online presence. His experience is in business communication as vice president of strategic communications for BerlinRosen and in strategic communication at Brennan Center for Justice, *The Nation*, and ProPublica.

The vice presidents are Claudia Borgelt, Mary Lynn Hickey, and Darragh Worland. Borgelt is vice president of development, a role in which she leads fundraising and financial support. Her experience in development comes from roles at Emory University, The Association Group, and BUILD, Inc. Hickey, as vice president of administration, is responsible for organizational management. Previously, she worked for housing and health nonprofit organizations and a religious retreat center. Worland, as vice president of creative services, is responsible for content development and NLP's brand strategy. Her prior experience is in the media industry as a media producer, media production educator, journalist, and media consultant.

Other than CEO Miller, the five most highly compensated employees at NLP are president and COO Salter, senior vice president of education Adams, vice president of development Borgelt, vice president of administration Hickey, and vice president of creative services Worland, with a combined $1,084,666 in reported income and $84,742 in other nonsalary compensation (News Literacy Project, 2019c). Miller and Salter have the highest individual salaries, at $283,739 and $234,905, respectively.

Employees

The remaining general staff at NLP includes nine employees focused on education, two in finance, seven in media and marketing, and four in administration. In addition to these staff members, NLP contracts News Literacy Ambassadors, a group of organizers and educators who are regionally based and are trained in news literacy to support local educators and identify how NLP can aid the local community (News Literacy Project, 2021k). News Literacy Ambassadors

host local events, attend virtual meetings, expand NLP's reach in their communities, and develop

relationships between NLP and local schools and school districts. Ambassadors are paid a $3,000

annual stipend for approximately eight hours of work per month during two school years (News

Literacy Project, 2021g). In September 2021, NLP had 12 Ambassadors in 10 regions and was

hiring in five new regions: Pittsburgh, Iowa, San Francisco, Denver, and Texas.

NLP also relies heavily on volunteers, who are an important part of the NLP labor force.

In its 2019 IRS-990 filings for tax exemption (News Literacy Project, 2019c), NLP reported an

estimated 100 volunteers. How NLP determined that number is unclear; however, it seems low.

Volunteers are predominantly journalists involved with NLP's Classroom Connection (formerly

Newsroom to Classroom), National News Literacy Week, and other local events. Classroom

Connection is a program accessible via Checkology® that has 139 registered journalists and

media experts (as of October 2021) who teachers can request as guest speakers for their classes.

These journalists include freelancers and professionals from major outlets such as National

Public Radio, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and ProPublica. NLP estimated that

over 750 journalists have volunteered through this program since its inception (Pulitzer Prizes,

2019). Another set of journalists in partnership with NLP are those involved with National News

Literacy Week; these volunteers go into classrooms or bring students into the office to talk about

news and news production. The important role of journalists and media practitioners who

volunteer with NLP brings up the necessary consideration of NLP's media partnerships.

Industry Partnerships and Government Relations

As of 2021, over 30 news and media organizations, from local to global media entities,

were partnered with NLP. NLP identifies partners as media groups that are "publicly endorsing

our mission, hosting or helping to lead our NewsLitCamp® sessions for educators, or donating

services or resources" (News Literacy Project, 2021d). NLP has publicly identified its media

partners in television, print, radio, digital, multimedia, agencies, and nonprofit organizations (see

Table 8) but has not clarified in what capacity these partners engage with NLP.

NLP's media partners represent a who's who of global media consolidation. For example,

NLP's television broadcasting company partners are owned by Disney, ViacomCBS, Comcast,

and Turner Broadcasting Systems. Their print partners include newspapers owned by Gannett,

Hearst Communications, and News Corp. Relationships exist between NLP's board and national

leadership council members and media partners. Among the members of NLP's board of

directors, Miller has a relationship with *The Los Angeles Times*, Mossberg has worked with *The

Wall Street Journal* and Vox Media, Acevedo has a relationship with Univision as a former

anchor and is a CBS News correspondent, and Phillip has connections to CNN, *The Washington

Post*, ABC News, and *POLITICO*. Among the national leadership council members, Keller had

roles with *The New York Times*, Gold is a section editor at *The Washington Post*, Weisenbach is

senior vice president at *The New York Times*, and Hiller has had publishing relations with *The

Chicago Tribune* and *The Los Angeles Times*.

Identifying these corporate media partnerships and ties to NLP's leadership teams reveals

the connections between corporate media and NLP. Compared with nonprofit and independent

media, corporate media partners have a greater presence. The ties between NLP's leadership and

its media partners indicate the reach of corporate media across NLP at both the leadership and

partnership levels. Although ties to a company such as News Corp do not necessarily mean that

this company has direct influence on what NLP includes in its curriculum, these ties do indicate

that for media companies to seek partnership, there must be something in NLP's mission, values,

curriculum, and other aspects that are beneficial or at least amenable to the interests of corporate

Table 8

NLP Media Partnerships (from News Literacy Project, 2021d, as of October 2020)

Medium	Owner
Television	
60 Minutes	ViacomCBS
ABC News	The Walt Disney Co.
CBS News	ViacomCBS
CNN	Turner Broadcasting System
NBC News	Comcast
Univision	Univision
Print	
The Chicago Sun Times	Sun-Times Media Group
The Chicago Tribune	Tribune Publishing
Financial Times	Nikkei, Inc.
The Houston Chronicle	Hearst Communications
The Los Angeles Times	Nant Capital
The New York Times	The New York Times Co.
The Philadelphia Inquirer	The Philadelphia Foundation
The San Francisco Chronicle	Hearst Communications
USA Today	Gannett
The Wall Street Journal	News Corp
The Washington Post	Nash Holdings
Radio	
National Public Radio	
89.3 KPCC, Pasadena, CA	
WTOP-FM, Washington, DC	Hubbard Broadcasting
Multimedia, agencies	
The Associated Press	
Bloomberg L.P.	
The E.W. Scripps Co.	
Reuters	Thomson Reuters Corp. (Woodbridge Co.)
Vox Media	
Digital	
BuzzFeed	Jonah Peretti, NBCUniversal, Verizon Media
POLITICO	Axel Springer SE
Slate	The Slate Group
Vice News	Vice Media
Nonprofit organizations	
Future Media Group	
Online News Association	
Pulitzer Center on Reporting	
ProPublica	

media. This becomes especially evident with the understanding that some major media organizations, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and Bloomberg, have had partnerships with NLP since almost its origin. These longstanding relationships indicate a benefit for corporate media that is worth the investment of their resources over an extended period.

In addition to industry partnerships, an understanding of government and social relationships helps to create a map of power and its relationship to an organization. For NLP, one political social relationship began in 2006 when Miller was on a journalism panel moderated by Alberto Ibargüen, a fellow Wesleyan University alumnus and president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Ibargüen connected Miller with the Knight Foundation's vice president for journalism, who helped secure the $250,000 grant that started NLP in 2008 (News Literacy Project, 2019b).

Later, Miller was invited in 2008 to give remarks to the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy (News Literacy Project, 2008a). Some members of this 17-person commission were Ibargüen, Google vice president Marissa Mayer, newspaper owner Robert Decherd, newspaper editor and former NLP board member John S. Carroll, president and CEO of the NAACP Ben Jealous, newspaper editor and president of the College Futures Foundation Mary Lozano, chairman of Disney Consumer Products Worldwide Andrew Mooney, and technology and social media researcher danah boyd (Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, 2009). The Knight Commission also included former FCC chairmen Michael K. Powell and Reed E. Hundt. Another FCC commissioner, Michael Copps, attended NLP's 2011 Washington, D.C. kickoff event (News Literacy Project, 2011c).

However, although governmental and social relations can occur at these high levels, part of NLP's mission is to create local and state government relations through education. The 2020 shift to free access to Checkology® enabled partnerships between NLP and the Los Angeles and New York City public school districts. NLP has also been working to establish partnerships with all 245 public schools in Hawai'i and with school districts in Illinois (where media literacy is now a required part of public education), South Carolina, North Carolina, Indiana, Missouri, and California (News Literacy Project, 2019c). The work of the News Literacy Ambassadors is also to identify and develop opportunities for partnerships between NLP and school districts at the local and regional level and to cultivate these relationships.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Based on the work of Bowen (1953), corporate social responsibility is a business's efforts regarding various aspects of community life, including environmental, social, economic, stakeholder, and voluntariness dimensions (Dahlsrud, 2008). NLP's mission to help students become "engaged, informed participants in our democracy" (News Literacy Project, 2020a, p. 2) reflects the social dimension of corporate social responsibility through which companies can "contribute to a better society" (Dahlsrud, 2008, p. 4). Thus, NLP has become an outlet for corporations to engage in corporate social responsibility through financial contributions, in-kind gifts, and partnerships.

One part of NLP's donor stewardship is the recognition of funders in ways commensurate with their gifts. According to the NLP gift policy, "this could include an acknowledgment on NLP's website, in its video productions or in its digital or printed materials; an oral thank-you or inclusion on signs at a public event; or mention in news releases" (News Literacy Project, 2018b, para. 10). This creates the opportunity for companies to demonstrate their corporate social

responsibility through sponsoring an organization that aims to support democracy through news literacy education. Although mentions and press releases are fleeting, NLP's Visionary Circle provides opportunities for corporate entities to have semipermanent online recognition. In the post-Trump, post-COVID-19 world of fake news, financial support for and alignment with a nonprofit media education organization appears to be responsible, prosocial, and prodemocracy.

National News Literacy Week, a collaboration between NLP and The E.W. Scripps Company, provides another opportunity for corporate social responsibility. The goal of National News Literacy week is to increase public awareness of and education about news literacy. National News Literacy Week was introduced in 2020 to precede the presidential primary season and was integrated into programming in 40 of 60 Scripps newsrooms across the United States (News Literacy Project, 2020b). National News Literacy Week also received 47 media mentions (beyond those from Scripps affiliates), reached approximately 444 million audience members, and increased NLP web traffic by nearly 3,000% compared with the same time the previous year (News Literacy Project, 2020b). Some larger news outlets, such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*, donated advertising space to NLP (Pellico, 2020).

National News Literacy Week 2021 increased the ways to engage on the NLP website, including a pledge to "Get NewsLit Fit" and an interactive quiz to "test your news literacy fitness" and "exercise your right to be well-informed." There were also public service announcements, links to NLP's main website, and a student video contest. The 2021 theme was fitness and making healthy choices about the news and information we consume. In addition to Scripps, NLP acknowledged its "supporters" (without description of their kind of support) online. This group included established media partners: The Associated Press, BuzzFeed, CNN, NPR, ProPublica, SmartNews, Inc., Vox Media, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington*

Post. Smaller companies and outlets also became supporters: *Bangor Daily News*, *The Day* of New London, Connecticut, the Local Media Association, Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting, and *The Valley Breeze* of Lincoln, Rhode Island. However, the bulk of media coverage came from Scripps affiliates.

After NLP partnered with about 40 Scripps television stations for National News Literacy Week 2020 (Pellico, 2020), its Scripps partnerships increased to 60 local television stations in 2021 (Scripps, 2021). Scripps owns 61 television affiliates in 41 markets across the United States. Across the country and across networks, Scripps affiliates such as ABC27 WTXL in Tallahassee, CBS3 KMTV in Omaha, NBC4 WTMJ in Milwaukee, and FOX17 WXMI in western Michigan included news literacy pages on their websites, and some stations added news literacy content to their news reports. Broad themes in their news literacy reports included helping the viewer (e.g., FOX4 Now, 2021), doing public relations for NLP (e.g., ABC10, 2021), and covering stories of station employees volunteering at local high schools (e.g., ABC Action News, 2021). In the vein of public relations, many of the news reports by anchors and reporters mentioned the partnership between NLP and The E.W. Scripps Company, their parent company.

Cultural Products

The cultural products, including the components, materials, and services created by NLP, were evaluated as part of this critical political economy in this study, as were NLP's relationships with media, including its social media presence and media coverage, the global reach and influence of NLP, and cultural critiques levied at NLP.

Defining News Literacy

Like often-critiqued media literacy definitions, NLP's definition of news literacy is broad: "the ability to determine the credibility of news and other content, to identify different

types of information, and to use the standards of authoritative, fact-based journalism to determine what to trust, share and act on" (News Literacy Project, 2020b, p. 4). NLP also separates news literacy from *being* news literate, which according to their educator resources includes "recognizing the critical role of the First Amendment and a free press in a democracy and interaction with news and other information in ways that promote engaged participation in civic life" (News Literacy Project, 2020c, p. 5). Put simply, NLP sees news literacy as the capability that allows one to consume and think about news and being news literate as the application of that capability.

NLP has framed news literacy as a solution to the challenges of modern life, including the ever-increasing amounts of accessible information and the complex and ever-evolving media and information systems, which is corroborated by research showing that students and adults generally lack news, media, and information literacy skills (News Literacy Project, 2021e, 2021h). The solution, from this perspective, is news literacy education, with NLP as the news literacy expert: "Our free resources, tools and easy-to-adopt tips help people of all ages become more news-literate" (News Literacy Project, 2020a, p. 4). The lack of news literacy among adults—parents and teachers included—is important because these people are needed to teach students how to engage with news; thus, NLP's goal: "News literacy is embedded in the American education experience. Both students and the public know how to identify credible news and other information" (News Literacy Project, 2021h, p. 4). This is not inherently problematic. However, questions remain: What *kind* of news literacy is embedded? What are the skills, knowledge, values, positionalities, and assumptions embedded in that news literacy? As is beginning to become evident, NLP has a particular vision for news literacy. Is this the kind of

news literacy that should be embedded in schools? Is this the approach that is best for democracy?

The rhetoric used by NLP relies on a few themes to illustrate the core importance of news literacy. Facts are central to this; news literacy enables "a future founded on facts" (News Literacy Project, 2020c, p. 20). Those who are news literate "give facts a fighting chance" (News Literacy Project, 2020a, p. 6). Facts enable the news literate to engage in citizenship and civics. News literacy allows people "to become smart, active consumers of news and other information and engaged, informed participants in civic life" (News Literacy Project, 2019c, p. 2). This message is longstanding in NLP's rhetoric. At the 2011 Washington, D.C. kickoff event, Miller said

> It's really imperative that students have the ability to be able to sort fact from fiction, to know what's credible versus what's incredible, and to be able to determine what they should believe as the basis for making decisions, taking action, being better citizens, better students today and ultimately better citizens, better informed citizens tomorrow. (News Literacy Project, 2011d)

The underlying idea is that news informs and prepares people for civic participation, which leads to a stronger democracy. Educators are told, "Join NewsLit Nation today. Democracy depends on it" (News Literacy Project, 2021j). However, NLP's tone around democracy has not been one of celebration, collaboration, or involvement; it has been one of threat.

Threat and fear are built into NLP's messaging, reflecting the protectionist approach that echoes across media literacy. NLP has repeated the refrain that "lack of news literacy is a threat to democracy" (News Literacy Project, 2020a, 2020e, 2021h). NLP has positioned news literacy as a problem that may be even bigger than democracy. Miller said, "The potential here is that we're moving toward an information dystopia. We're racing against it. And this is the only way to give facts a fighting chance, is [sic] to create a new-literate next generation" (News Literacy Project, 2019d).

NLP has used fear-based advocacy for news literacy. In a recent promotional video, dark colors, threatening music, and fear-invoking copy communicated the message that the information landscape is a threat to young people and the future, before the ad shifted to bright colors, upbeat music, and hopeful narration when NewsLit Nation was introduced (News Literacy Project, 2021j). This kind of heavy-handed appeal to fear and the ideas that "people are vulnerable" and "news literacy skills have never been needed more urgently" (News Literacy Project, 2021h, p. 3) serves to reinforce the idea of an imminent threat to which NLP is the immediate, vital, and necessary response.

Services and Resources

To fully understand NLP and its impact, the depth and breadth of its resources and services must be considered, including curricular resources, public resources, marketing and communication materials, professional development services, and global resources and reach. NLP's website is the central hub for accessing its informational material, organizational data, and education resources. This reflects its 2016 shift from push-in supportive services to remotely accessible online educational resources and curriculum.

Give Facts a Fighting Chance: A Global Playbook for Teaching News Literacy (News Literacy Project, 2019b) was developed by NLP and the Facebook Journalism Project. In it, the process for curriculum development was described as began with a driving question: "What do we want students to be able to do as a result of our resources?" (News Literacy Project, 2019b, p. 28). Four "enduring understandings" from the original curriculum were proposed to answer that question: "why news matters, the role of the First Amendment and a free press in a democracy, how to know what to believe, and the challenges and opportunities created by the internet and digital media" (News Literacy Project, 2019b, p. 28). The understandings were then trimmed to

measurable "essential core skills and concepts ... filtering news and information, exercising civic freedom, navigating today's information landscape, and learning how to know what to believe" (News Literacy Project, 2019b, p. 28). These themes are reflected in the curriculum in Checkology®.

Teaching Tools: Checkology®, NewsLit Nation, and Flipgrid

Checkology® is NLP's virtual classroom, and it is aimed at sixth through twelfth grades. NLP began with an in-person instructional model but switched to an online model in response to the increasing labor and resources requirements for scaling nationally (News Literacy Project, 2019b). Checkology® is NLP's main instructional tool and at its last reporting was hosting over 33,300 student users and over 700 educator users across 44 states (News Literacy Project, 2020b).

The first version of Checkology® was introduced in May 2016, and a second version— the version available at the time of this writing—was introduced in August 2018. For the first four years of Checkology®, a licensing fee was required for all users to access the virtual classroom. However, in August 2020, that paywall was permanently removed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and NLP has reported shifting from a sales model to an "educator success model" (News Literacy Project, 2019c, p. 2). Exactly what this model entails is largely unclear, although presumably it captures a shift from using sales to using educator enrollment as the growth metric.

Checkology® consists of 13 lessons, all which NLP identified as standards based aligned with Common Core English Language Arts, C3 Framework for Social Studies, International Society for Technology in Education, and the standards in 18 states (Checkology®, 2021; News Literacy Project, 2020c). NLP has emphasized "story-driven interactive lessons" (News Literacy

Project, 2019b, p. 33), and their accompanying assessments are flexible, scalable, and compatible with but not reliant on accompanying classroom instruction. As with any learning tool, especially those that claim to have one-size-fits-many-if-not-all offerings, questions must be asked: What does interactivity means in this context? Is it engaging or passive? What are students doing: creating, synthesizing, analyzing? According to NLP, interactivity allows students to "learn the skills and tools of professional fact checkers …, play the role of reporter, and … travel to a country to hear about press freedoms from a local journalist" (News Literacy Project, 2020c, p. 9). How does this work? The curriculum relies on web-based lesson modules featuring videos embedded in each lesson. The lessons are hosted and taught by professional journalists (see Table 9 for Checkology® lesson topics and hosts).

Other built-in Checkology® resources are The Check Center and Classroom Connection. The Check Center provides students three scaffolded ways to use, practice, and develop their news literacy skills. Classroom Connection is a directory of professional journalists who volunteer to speak with classes. Separate from Checkology® and introduced in January 2021, NewsLit Nation is NLP's news literacy educator online network. The NewsLit Nation web portal offers registered member teachers resources including discussion boards, access to the News Literacy Ambassadors, and event information. At the time of this writing, NewsLit Nation was less than a year old and had limited content, but it redirects users to Checkology® resources, including a resource library of NLP-produced and user-created instructional materials, newsletter archives, Classroom Connection, professional development, NewsLitCamp® information, the Informable mobile app, the *Is That a Fact?* podcast, and user help.

Table 9

Checkology® Lessons, Topics, and Hosts (from Checkology® Lesson Listings, as of February 2022)

Lesson and Title	Topic	Host, Affiliation
1. InfoZones	Types of information	Tracie Potts, NBC News Channel
2. Democracy's Watchdog	History of the watchdog role in the United States	Wesley Lowery, *60 Minutes*, formerly *The Washington Post*
3. Misinformation	Types and impacts of misinformation	Claire Wardle, First Draft
4. Practicing Quality Journalism	Journalistic standards	Enrique Acevedo, *60 Minutes*, formerly Univision
5. Arguments and Evidence	Logical fallacies	Kimberley Stassel, *The Wall Street Journal*
6. Citizen Watchdogs	Identifying wrongdoing	Tamerra Griffin, Rest of the World (nonprofit), formerly BuzzFeed News
7. Introduction to Algorithms	Algorithms and personalized information	Nicco Mele, Richards Kaplan Foundation and the Harvard Kennedy School
8. Press Freedoms Around the World	Comparisons of global press freedoms	Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, NPR
9. Understanding Bias	Types of bias in journalism	Indira Lackshmanan, *National Geographic*
10. Branded Content	Role and ethics of advertising in news	Emily Withrow, formerly of Quartz and Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism
11. The First Amendment	Protections of the U.S. First Amendment	Sam Chaltain, author
12. What is News?	Understanding criteria for newsworthiness and inclusion in news	Paul Saltzman, *The Chicago-Sun Times*
13. Be the Editor	Applying understanding of newsworthiness	

Another new educator tool that NLP has developed for educator use is on Flipgrid, a

social learning tool from Microsoft. This interactive video platform allows users to create topics

or short videos and accompanying descriptions, which can include questions, writing or

discussion prompts, and links to other resources. Teachers can save topics, add them to their online classroom, and assign them to students to complete. At the time of writing, NLP had 55 topics for teachers to use in their news literacy instruction.

Mobile Resources: Informable and **Is That a Fact?** *Podcast*

For nonschool engagement, NLP provides resources that are useful to teachers, students, and the public. The first is Informable, a mobile app released in 2019 that gamifies news literacy education. Users play three levels in four different modes to practice news literacy skills. Three modes ask users to distinguish fact from opinion, evidence from baseless claims, and news from opinion; the fourth mode, the mix-up mode, combines the other three modes. Informable also has a leaderboard that ranks users based on their time and score. The app has had over 15,000 downloads (News Literacy Project, 2020b) with a rating of 3.5 stars on Apple's App Store.

The other mobile resource, *Is That a Fact?*, is NLP's podcast. Worland, vice president of creative services for NLP, hosts the podcast, which premiered in 2020 and hosts guests and experts who deconstruct and discuss contemporary issues of news and information literacy. Past guests and experts have come from BuzzFeed News, the RAND Corporation, and *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Guests have been diverse, including a former CIA analyst, a technology journalist, and a Dartmouth professor of government. At the time of this writing, 13 episodes of 30 to over 60 minutes were available from Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, iHeart, Amazon Music, and the NLP website.

Member Communications

To reach its audiences, NLP has created targeted communication through blogs and newsletters. NLP blogs have taken different shape over the years. At the time of this writing, the Medium blog was last updated in August 2020, the Civics Connection blog on the NLP website

was last updated in February 2019, and a weekly feature in *The Washington Post* Answer Sheet

section by Valerie Strauss has run during the 2020–21 and 2021–22 academic years. These blogs

work toward NLP's goal of disseminating news literacy information to the public.

For teachers, NLP produces *The Sift®*, an email newsletter about news literacy for

educators. The newsletter, sent weekly on Mondays during the school year, reached nearly

11,000 subscribers during the 2020 fiscal year (News Literacy Project, 2020b). This free e-

newsletter addresses current issues of news literacy, including misinformation, current event

coverage in media, and First Amendment and freedom of the press issues, and includes prompts

and activities for the classroom. NLP's other weekly e-newsletter, *Get Smart About News*, draws

from *The Sift®* to provide the public with weekly insights and ideas of news literacy without the

classroom components.

Professional Development

Another offering from NLP is professional development. NLP reported that 2,200

teachers participated in professional development opportunities in 2019; in 2020, that number

more than doubled to 4,857 teacher participants (News Literacy Project, 2019a, 2020b). NLP

provides three kinds of development opportunities: professional learning, NewsLitCamp®, and

public webinars.

NLP professional development for educators can be accessed online or onsite. Six

general topics are covered in these sessions: introduction to news literacy, standards-based

journalism, bias, digital verification, misinformation in the current mediascape, and news literacy

for democratic engagement (News Literacy Project, 2020c). Missing from these trainings are

sessions focused on power, such as issues of media ownership, media consolidation, and

representation.

NewsLitCamp® are one-day professional development workshops are led by NLP staff or local news professionals who teach news literacy to teachers, librarians, and media staff (News Literacy Project, 2020c). The workshops aim to be interactive and practical, so teachers can learn what news literacy is and have tools, activities, and relevant materials to integrate into classroom instruction (News Literacy Project, 2020c). In the 2018–19 academic year, NLP arranged eight NewsLitCamp® workshops across the United States, from New York City with *The Wall Street Journal* to Los Angeles with *The Los Angeles Times* (News Literacy Project, 2019a). In the following academic year, NLP engaged 473 educators and 73 journalists to participate in seven NewsLitCamp® events (News Literacy Project, 2019c), including events in Washington, D.C. with National Public Radio, in New York City with Bloomberg News, and in Akron, Ohio with *The Akron Beacon Journal* (News Literacy Project, 2020b).

Because most NewsLitCamp® events are sponsored by local news organizations and hosted in newsrooms, the number and location of these camps are limited by where and when sponsors can host them (News Literacy Project, 2020c, 2021a). Past NewsLitCamp® hosts and sponsors include nonprofit The 19th sponsored by Google News Initiative; *The Star Tribune*, MPR News, and Sourcewell Technology sponsored by The Knight Foundation; *The Wall Street Journal* sponsored by News Corp, and South Carolina ETV and Public Radio and *The Post and Courier* also sponsored by The Knight Foundation (News Literacy Project, 2021f). Other news sponsors have included CNN Worldwide, Univision, Bloomberg Industry Group, NPR, *Time*, and *The Washington Post* (News Literacy Project, 2020c, 2021f).

NLP also provides public-facing webinars and events. These are not for educators or news professionals but for people who engage with news and information every day. Recently, NLP has been increasing its what is available for the general population in news literacy

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education. One example of this is a webinar for older Americans that addresses misinformation, which was presented in partnership with AARP's Older Adults Technology Services. NLP's National News Literacy Week is also a major public-facing event.

Social Media and Media Coverage

NLP also reaches its audience through its online presence. In addition to its website, NLP has a presence on four major social media platforms: YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. NLP's smallest and oldest social media profile is its YouTube channel (/TheNewsLiteracyProject), which was established in March 2009. As of October 2021, this channel had a little over 1,000 subscribers and nearly 130 videos. NLP's next smallest but newest profile is Instagram (@NewsLitProject), which began in March 2020 and has approximately 3,500 followers and 226 posts. Facebook and Twitter are where NLP has the most followers. Its Twitter account (@NewsLitProject) has amassed 26,100 followers since August 2011, and its Facebook account (/NewsLitProject), which has been active since January 2012, has 18,800 profiles. NLP also hosts a private 700-member Facebook group for teachers who use Checkology®. NLP is not on TikTok, despite the platform's fast growth, popularity, and reputation for mis- and disinformation.

NLP gets popular press and mass media coverage. Common themes in coverage include general or informational profiles about NLP (e.g., Harris, 2021; PBS News Hour, 2011; Sullivan & Bajarin, 2018), how NLP is used in classrooms (e.g., Lapowsky, 2017; Rodriquez, 2021; Staahl, 2021; Tuegend, 2020), and how companies such as J. Walter Thompson, The E.W. Scripps Company, and Apple are engaged with news literacy through NLP, which is essentially corporate public relations (e.g., Peterson, 2021; Scripps, 2021; Stein, 2017). Public and higher education libraries also identify NLP for their patrons as an authoritative resource on news

literacy education (e.g., LSU Libraries, 2021; Schein, 2020; UAB Libraries, 2021; Worcester Public Library, 2021); NLP includes librarians as a target audience for their services and has a librarian as a News Literacy Ambassador. NLP's presence on social media, in popular media, and in libraries highlights its reach outside of schools. The organization also has an international presence.

Global Resources and Reach

Although NLP's focus is domestic, it provides resources and services to other countries. One such resource is *Give Facts a Fighting Chance: A Global Playbook for Teaching News Literacy* (News Literacy Project, 2019b), which was developed in partnership with the Facebook Journalism Project. This informational resource is intended to help new and developing news literacy programs and organizations around the world get started and includes NLP's history; definitions of organizing concepts such as news literacy, fake news, misinformation, and disinformation; the roles and importance of news literacy and civics in education; and best practices for news literacy education and outreach communication. NLP also provides limited support to international organizations for developing news literacy resources, curricula, and websites.

NLP also provides consulting services and speaking engagements for non-U.S. entities (News Literacy Project, 2021c). NLP speakers have presented in countries such as Canada, Brazil, and Denmark on topics such as civics education, free press and democracy, and misinformation. NLP staff have hosted educational workshops and trainings in countries such as Hungary, the United Kingdom, and Argentina. Through funding from the Facebook Journalism Project, NLP also has participated in local news literacy collaborations in Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia, Jordan, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Poland, and

Ukraine. As of October 2022, the organization reported relationships in 122 countries through Checkology®, educational workshops, consulting, and/or speaking engagements (*NLP's global impact*, 2019). Entities in six countries (Brazil, Germany, Canada, the Philippines, Spain, and the United Kingdom) have used Checkology® and two other services. Entities in 16 countries (Argentina, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Denmark, Hungary, Indonesia, Japan, Jordan, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, Sweden, Taiwan, and Ukraine) have used Checkology® and one other service. The remaining 100 countries use Checkology®.

Is NLP engaging in a form of media imperialism? Does the size and power of this media education organization and its ideologies challenge smaller local media education organizations (Bagdikian, 2004)? Does NLP's size and scope allow it to impose a U.S.-centric view of news and news literacy on other countries? NLP's resources are written from a decidedly U.S. perspective, and NLP history and process are exemplars for developing news literacy programs, including how to develop school partnerships, gather and use student and teacher feedback, create assessments for student learning objectives, collaborate with professional journalists, partner with after school programs, and scale up.

In the *Global Playbook* (News Literacy Project, 2019b), NLP acknowledged the state of journalism in other countries, and NLP has acknowledged organizations already doing news literacy or related work in other countries. However, NLP does not engage with other global perspectives. For example, it does not question what civics education or news literacy might mean in non-Western or non-U.S. contexts or how journalistic norms in other countries differ or affect other ways of knowing. Of course, NLP does not require any organizations or governments to utilize their resources. However, the available programs are not culturally responsive or inclusive. This may not be the case during consulting, workshops, or speaking

events, but we know that most of the countries that use NLP's resources—100 out of 122—use only Checkology®, a resource that was created specifically for an American audience. Thus, the question of media imperialism remains.

Criticism

Criticism about NLP in the popular press and academic publications is limited, especially in comparison to the informational, celebratory, or public relations commentary. However, reviewing the persons or organizations who are researching and reporting on NLP through a critical lens is an important issue to address. Most criticism comes from independent organizations and individuals; it is not produced or published by corporate media outlets. Most of the criticism at the time of writing is from media watchdog group Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) and scholars Nolan Higdon and Mike Caulfield.

These critics have identified three problems with NLP. One is NLP's corporate and grant funding. At the time of FAIR's critique (Regan, 2019), NLP was generating nearly $3 million in funding while charging for individual student licenses to access the full slate of lessons on Checkology®. NLP is adamant that corporate funding does not have an editorial influence on their resources, as per its gift acceptance policy (News Literacy Project, 2018b). Yet, as an example, the *Global Playbook* (News Literacy Project, 2019b), which was funded by the Facebook Journalism Project, addressed how media technologies, specifically social media, have fueled the spread of mis- and disinformation but only acknowledged the steps Facebook has taken to remedy this. The *Global Playbook* lacks critical reflection on how social media platforms, including Facebook, are responsible for creating policies and structures that actively enable and perpetuate online mis- and disinformation. Although this was published well before

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the 2020 election, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Haugen's whistleblower account of Facebook, these editorial choices seem more egregious and apologist in their wake.

Another problem addressed by critics is NLP's use of corporate journalists as news literacy experts. Critical news literacy expert Nolan Higdon argued that including corporate news journalists as news literacy experts reinforces a narrow and specific understanding of what counts as news: "Journalism became quite professionalized—and especially in corporate media, now the people who pass for journalists … tend to come from the same Ivy League schools and backgrounds of the people they're covering in the political class" (Riggo, 2020). NLP also has failed to address who makes up most corporate journalists, which FAIR says "tend to be elite, white, Washington-adjacent men" (Riggo, 2020) who often lack a class, race, or gender-based lens in reporting because their identity is situated as the default. Corporate journalists as news literacy experts may not provide a critical analysis of their work, journalistic standards, or the journalism industry. These experts may critique the system of power in which they operate but are unlikely to challenge it.

NLP programs have also been criticized for what they lack. Gaps include economic analyses of news that address ownership, profit, and audiences (Regan, 2019) and other issues of power such as race, class, and gender (Riggo, 2020). A curriculum based on corporate journalistic standards that caution against taking a stand, even in issues of injustice, dismisses and even erases the rich American history of investigative journalism that has used reporting to influence public attitudes about social improvements (Regan, 2019). These gaps reinforce the idea that a specific kind of news is the only valid kind of news, and the kind of news that is deemed valid is the kind that benefits the groups already in power, not those who challenge power.

Mike Caulfield (2017), former director of Blended and Networked Learning at Washington State University Vancouver, wrote on his blog that NLP is "less obviously bad," but its main flaw is the focus on fact-checking, which ultimately boils down to web illiteracy, not news literacy. (This post was republished a few weeks later by Observer.com where it gained more views.) Caulfield's critique was that Checkology® operates as if information were scarce and that the same tools and techniques can be used for online and print news, both assumptions that he sees as inaccurate. In their response, NLP (2017b) claimed that Caulfield misrepresented Checkology® by critiquing a resource provided online but not included in the virtual classroom, that Checkology® is loved around the world, and that news literacy and web literacy are essentially the same skills.

This leaves questions: Isn't a critique of the online resource still appropriate if the resource is published and available for use outside of Checkology® because it is representative of NLP's approach? How does student and educator acceptance reflect a tool's educational quality? Many programs (e.g., Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) and techniques (e.g., corporal punishment) have been used in education; these examples are evidence quality cannot be ensured simply because an educational tool is "embraced" (News Literacy Project, 2017b). Are news literacy and web literacy the same, or is this statement a reflection of NLP's location in a primarily online space? These critiques and questions remain areas of investigation.

Conclusion

A critical political economy of NLP was built by addressing the historical, political, economic, financial, and cultural aspects of NLP; without considering each area, an inquiry of the organization would be incomplete. This nonprofit organization, started by a professional journalist, grew over 10 years by relying on professional journalist volunteerism, accepting

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corporate financial and in-kind support, and shifting from in-person to fully virtual education products and resources. The economic and financial analysis of NLP indicates that the organization relies on neoliberal capitalist metrics to grow and expand, including its strategic growth plan, its reliance on philanthropy, and its expenses and revenue. The political analysis of NLP indicated overwhelming ties to corporate and professional media and the dearth of educators in board or advisory roles, bringing up questions of who this organization primarily benefits: corporate media or educators and students? The analysis of NLP's cultural impact revealed the reach of its products and resources, domestically and globally, in schools and in the public.

While making no claim that NLP is controlled by its funders, as an organization dependent on grants, corporate donations, and other forms of philanthropy, its mission must appeal to a broad audience, as evidenced by the list of NLP funders, which includes corporate media. Foundations and companies do not fund projects that do not align with their own goals, missions, ideologies, and values. Thus, the dependence on power—namely corporate funding and the close relationships with members of corporate media—suggests that the content of NLP's products is, in some way, beneficial to those systems of power. NLP's focus is education, which makes scrutiny of its leadership, goals, funding, and products even more important. If NLP is aiming for authority and supremacy as the leading voice in news literacy by shaping what news literacy is and how it is taught in the United States (and globally), then the hegemony it is establishing must be scrutinized. The implicit and explicit messages in NLP's news literacy curriculum Checkology®, its most popular and used resource in the U.S. and abroad, can be addressed through critical curriculum analysis.

CHAPTER VI

CRITICAL CURRICULUM ANALYSIS OF NLP'S

CHECKOLOGY® 101 CURRICULUM

> The way the curriculum was organized, the principles upon which it was built and evaluated, and, finally, the very knowledge itself, all of these were critically important if we were to understand how power was reproduced.
> —Michael W. Apple, *Education and Power*

Introduction

This study included a critical analysis of NLP's Checkology® curriculum to evaluate its form and content. The analysis of form covered the curriculum structure and organization. The analysis of content covered the curriculum ideas and material, specifically those in Checkology® 101, NLP's default courses for middle and high school instruction, and was evaluated using two frameworks: a neo-Marxist curriculum theory frame and a CRT curriculum frame.

Curriculum Analysis: Form

Based on Apple's (1982) work that analyzed curriculum through form and content, this curriculum analysis began by interrogating the form of NLP's Checkology® curriculum: How is the curriculum put together and how it is organized? A broad examination was conducted of the full Checkology® curriculum, including teacher resources and student lessons, which are housed entirely online (https://checkology.org/). After registering and creating a free login, educators can access the curriculum via the Checkology® website.

Checkology® Website and Organization

The Checkology® Dashboard (landing page) has links to tools and information for teachers. The first two sections on the Dashboard provide teachers with instructional support. Teachers can use the Classes page to create classes, add students, see completed student work, assign lessons, and grade assessments. The Content page gives teachers access to all available

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Checkology® lessons and exercises. Teachers can browse and preview the lessons included in the prebuilt Checkology® 101 courses or investigate the additional lessons and exercises before assigning them to a class.

Other sections available through the Dashboard provide extra resources and administrative support for educators. First is The Check Center, which provides two tools, the Quick Check and the Toolbox, for both teachers and students to use. The Quick Check is a series of question prompts designed to assist users in determining the credibility of online content and can be saved for future reference. The Toolbox provides Tips, such as key commands and other shortcuts to use for online information verification, and Skills video tutorials for online fact checking. The Skills videos, hosted by NLP staff members and a former CIA intelligence analyst, include topics such as reverse image search, geolocation, Google image search, critical observation, and lateral reading. The Discuss section can be used to create and view discussion boards, open the Feedback section to review student work submissions, and access the Messages section to write messages to students or read messages from NLP site administrators.

In addition to the sections accessible through the Dashboard, the navigation menu at the top of the page provides access to other sections of Checkology®. The first three links in the navigation menu—Dashboard, Content, and Check Center—are available on the landing page after logging in, and their additional inclusion here indicates the importance of these sections. The Journalists section takes teachers to the page for Classroom Connection, the program through which journalists volunteer to speak with classes. The list of volunteer journalists is searchable by location;22 areas of expertise such as investigative journalism, social media issues, and local politics; seven languages, including Arabic, Mandarin, and Spanish; and mode of availability. Many of the participating journalists are from media outlets recognized as NLP

supporters, including NPR, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, ProPublica, Bloomberg, CNN, The E.W. Scripps Company, and Reuters. Freelancers, local journalists, and journalism scholars are also on this list.

The Resources section of Checkology® is also accessible through the navigation menu and provides teachers with most of the instructional and curricular materials they need to implement Checkology® in their classes. This includes preparatory materials, such as guides for teachers and introductory letters that can be sent to parents; lesson guides and transcripts; assessment answer keys; alignment charts for state standards; five NLP professional development videos; posters and infographics; feedback surveys; News Goggles, which are sets of Google Slide decks based on *The Sift*® newsletters; and model release consent forms for audiovisual recording in classrooms.

The last navigation menu tab links to More. This catchall section includes links to the Discussion Wall, which is the teacher-created discussion board, and the Word Wall, which is a digital glossary of journalism-related vocabulary used in Checkology® lessons. A link is also provided to the pre- and post-assessments that NLP asks teachers and students to complete. The assessments include 12 content questions assessed through various modes, including true or false, matching, agree or disagree, and multiple choice. Two survey questions are included to measure student civic engagement and confidence levels in media. The Check Center, Classroom Connection, Word Wall, and other sections add variety to Checkology®'s offerings, but they are not the core components of this curricular package, and the curriculum could be taught without engaging most of these elements. The essential content needed to implement Checkology® in classrooms are the lessons.

Checkology® Lessons

        Checkology® lessons are the instructional components of the program and include videos and interactive assessments. Skills and concepts are evaluated in the lessons by quick assessments (i.e., multiple choice, matching, yes-or-no questions), short-answer questions, long-answer questions, and student uploads, in which students make something outside the Checkology® platform and upload evidence of it for teacher evaluation.

        As per the Checkology® Comprehensive Lesson Guide (News Literacy Project, n.d.a), there are four thematic categories into which the lessons fall. The theme Filtering News and Information includes the lessons InfoZones, What Is News?, and Be the Editor. The theme Exercising Civic Freedom includes the lessons The First Amendment, Democracy's Watchdog, Citizen Watchdogs, and Press Freedoms Around the World. The theme Navigating Today's Information Landscape includes the lessons Branded Content and Introduction to Algorithms. The largest thematic category is How to Know What to Believe and includes the lessons Understanding Bias, Misinformation, Arguments and Evidence, Practicing Quality Journalism, and Conspiratorial Thinking. Not all lessons are included in the Checkology® 101 courses.

        In addition to lessons, Checkology® provides resources to "Practice" and "Extend" learning. This includes Exercises, which provide additional practice for skills and concepts from the lessons: seven for InfoZones, two for Misinformation, two for Arguments and Evidence, two for What Is News?, three for Branded Content, and two for Understanding Bias. Eleven supplemental extension Challenges, which are extension activities, are available to supplement some lessons: two for Democracy's Watchdog, two for The First Amendment, three for InfoZones, two for Practicing Quality Journalism, one for Misinformation, and one stand-alone challenge called "How News-Literate Are You?" Teachers can add Check Center Missions, in

which students are asked to practice digital verification and fact checking. The topics and contents of the seven Check Center Missions are wide ranging in topic and content, from Verifying Social Media Content to "Make America White Again?" Like the lessons, not all exercises, challenges, or missions are included in the Checkology® 101 courses.

From these components, educators can custom build their courses to include any of the lessons, exercises, challenges, and missions or can import Checkology® 101, the prebuilt default course prepared by NLP. Checkology® 101 for the middle school level includes eight lessons and six supplemental activities (see Table 10), and the course for high school and higher education levels has seven lessons and six supplemental activities (see Table 11). Between the two prebuilt Checkology® 101 courses, each has slightly different learning objectives.

After educators decide on the courses, they assign these courses to students, who complete the lessons and supplemental activities individually. Teachers can add engagement with students after or during lessons, like whole group and small group discussions, but those interactive in-person elements are not structured into the Checkology® lessons. Instead, students can start and complete all lessons individually. Although this may create some benefits for teachers, especially during the 2020–22 academic years during which a shift to remote instruction required student work that could be completed individually and online, it also creates technological barriers for participation. Technological requirements include individual computer access, internet signal and speeds that support streaming audio and visual content, audio output capabilities, and other hardware such as headphones to support viewing and listening. Students from poor and racialized minority groups have less access to the internet (Sen & Tucker, 2020). Thus, the structural technology needed to access Checkology® lessons could extend class and race disparities in news literacy based on accessibility.

Table 10

Middle School Checkology® 101 Course Description, Lessons, and Lesson Objectives (from News Literacy Project, n.d.z)

Course Description	
In this course, students will complete eight lessons and six supplementary activities covering the core concepts and skills of news literacy	
Title	**Type of Content**
InfoZones	Lesson
InfoZones: School Lunch	Exercise
What Is News?	Lesson
News Judge: National News	Exercise
Be The Editor	Lesson
Practicing Quality Journalism	Lesson
Evaluating Sources Online	Check Center Mission
The First Amendment	Lesson
Misinformation	Lesson
MisinfoChallenge: Fact-checking 101	Challenge
Arguments and Evidence	Lesson
Evaluating Evidence Online	Check Center Mission
Branded Content	Lesson
Ad or Not? Level 1	Exercise
Lesson Objectives	
"In this course, students: • Categorize information into six InfoZones. • Determine newsworthiness and make editorial decisions. • Recognize the standards of quality journalism in practice. • Determine the credibility of sources. • Learn about the five freedoms protected by The First Amendment and how the Supreme Court has ruled in six cases. • Identify five types of misinformation and describe the consequences of sharing it. • Identify logical fallacies in an argument. • Determine whether social media posts contain evidence for their claims. • Identify traditional and non-traditional advertisements."	

Checkology® Form Critique

Checkology® provides an easily accessible, well-organized, and visually appealing curricular package for middle and high school teachers. The platform's amount of content and user-friendly structure may be especially appealing to overworked, underresourced teachers who have been tasked with integrating media or news literacy into their classroom. In fact, the

Table 11

High School Checkology® 101 Course Description, Lessons, and Lesson Objectives (from News Literacy Project, n.d.z)

Course Description	
In this course, students will complete seven lessons and six supplementary activities covering the core concepts and skills of news literacy	
Title	**Type of Content**
InfoZones	Lesson
InfoZones: School Lunch	Exercise
The First Amendment	Lesson
Democracy's Watchdog	Lesson
Evaluating Sources Online	Check Center Mission
Misinformation	Lesson
MisinfoChallenge: Fact-checking 101	Challenge
Evaluating Evidence Online	Check Center Mission
Understanding Bias	Lesson
Bias Types and Forms: Level 1	Exercise
Conspiratorial Thinking	Lesson
Verifying Social Media Content	Check Center Mission
Lesson Objectives	
"In this course, students: • Categorize information into six InfoZones. • Learn about the five freedoms protected by The First Amendment and how the Supreme Court has ruled in six cases. • Learn about the importance of the press's watchdog role via five landmark investigative reports and series. • Recognize the standards of quality journalism in practice. • Determine the credibility of a source. • Identify five types of misinformation and describe the consequences of sharing it. • Determine whether social media posts contain evidence for their claims. • Evaluate hypothetical scenarios for the presence of news media bias. • Discover why people are drawn to conspiracy theories and how our cognitive biases can trick us into believing they're real. • Explore the three pillars of digital verification: source, date and location."	

Checkology® curriculum has an essentially plug-and-play structure. Although the intent

probably is for teachers to watch NLP's professional development videos, review the detailed

lesson guides, and build discussion into the lessons, the form and structure of the Checkology®

virtual classroom does not require any of this. It is possible to assign a class the Checkology®

101 course and allow the technology to teach the class without any student-to-student or teacher-to-student interactions. The Checkology® curriculum is delivered online via a one-to-one model in which students watch a video or read an on-screen text and respond to questions and writing prompts.

Little to no opportunity is provided to co-construct meaning and knowledge through discussion. A discursive element is essential to learning in many critical education approaches (Bamber & Crowther, 2012; Friere, 1968/2018). Without this element, students may not have the opportunity to integrate new information, different perspectives, and personal experiences into their learning. Students do have the opportunity to engage with NLP curriculum through the multiple interactive elements in every lesson in the Checkology® 101 courses, including short-answer and essay questions, multiple choice responses, and ranked choice prompts. However, there are no structured discussions with peers or teachers. Unless a teacher is elaborating on the curriculum to include it, discussion is missing from the Checkology® 101 lessons. Lacking discussion and peer interaction results in failure to capture the ever-increasing social nature of news and information. In the present mediascape with social media as a central source of news and information, there will almost necessarily be a dialogic element to reading, watching, or listening to the news. In fact, one hosts explains in a video lesson that "anyone can share information, which means that more voices are added to the mix" (News Literacy Project, n.d.f). The limitations of the form of this curriculum restrict engagement with news and information in an authentic manner.

A related critique of the form and structure of this curriculum is that it is not only isolating for learners as they complete it, but the lessons themselves are isolated. Most of the lessons function discretely, meaning without skill spiraling or reference to previously learned

skills. Because the form of the curriculum allows teachers the "freedom" to build-your-own

course from the Checkology® lessons and activities library, each lesson is a stand-alone module.

As such, the lessons are not a cohesive set; they do not build on or provide scaffolded learning.

Instead, the lessons exist mostly independently of each other without and do not encourage the

intentional transfer, application, or integration of concepts, ideas, or skills from one lesson to

another. Encountering individual concepts in isolation does not replicate an authentic news and

information environment in which students will need to apply multiple news literacy skills.

The Checkology® online platform provides many resources for teachers, including

premade audiovisual lessons and supplemental activities for practice and extension.

Checkology® gives teachers a default course for middle and high school students but also allows

a level of personalization to build-your-own courses from Checkology® lessons and

supplements. Although this form seems to provide the structure and flexibility to meet the needs

of teachers, its one-to-one online delivery format limits discursive engagement and cocreation of

knowledge among students. The ability to personalize courses by choosing which lessons are or

are not included and in which order limits the spiraling and integration of other course content by

treating news literacy as distinct and discrete skills instead of related and interdependent

concepts for critical thinking. In both cases, the form of the curriculum limits students from

engaging with and applying news literacy in ways that reflect authentic news literacy application

outside the classroom.

<div align="center">**Curriculum Analysis: Content**</div>

The second part of the curriculum analysis in this study was focused on content: what

knowledge is included and the ideologies that knowledge reinforces or challenges. To answer

RQ_2 (How and in what ways does the news literacy curriculum of NLP challenge and reinforce

neoliberal capitalism?), neo-Marxist curriculum theory was used to deconstruct, assess, and evaluate the roles that neoliberal capitalist ideologies play in the Checkology® 101 curriculum. To answer RQ$_3$ (How and in what ways does the news literacy curriculum of NLP challenge and reinforce racism?), CRT was used as a framework to analyze the roles of racialized ideologies in the same curriculum.

Findings: Neoliberal Capitalist Ideologies in Checkology® 101

A series of questions derived from the existing literature (Apple, 1986, 2004) guided this analysis of neoliberal capitalism in Checkology®. These questions (see Chapter IV, Methods) interrogate ideology by investigating the inclusion and exclusion of knowledge and the way existing power structures are reinforced and resisted. This framework resulted in the distillation of three central findings regarding Checkology® 101's implicit and explicit ideological messages about neoliberal capitalism: the use of consumer-based language in instruction juxtaposed with the use of democracy-centric rhetoric, the legitimation of corporate news as the standard or metric for quality news, and a failure to connect news literacy issues with economics.

Consumer Language Over Democracy Rhetoric

The lessons included in the Checkology® 101 course show a pattern of using consumer-focused language and ideas in juxtaposition to the rhetoric of democracy. The word "consumer" is used repeatedly to describe people who engage with media and media texts. For example, in the Understanding Bias lesson, the phrase "news consumer" is used three times to refer to people who watch, read, or listen to the news. In explaining partisan bias, the host says, "This is one of the most common criticisms news consumers make" (News Literacy Project, n.d.bb). Later in the lesson, the host says that neutrality bias "is actually misleading for news consumers, and sometimes fuels false narratives in public debate" (News Literacy Project, n.d.dd). In the same

lesson, the host states, "News consumers are most bothered when they perceive news reports as unfair and unbalanced" (News Literacy Project, n.d.ee). The same "news consumer" language can be heard in the What Is News? lesson (News Literacy Project, n.d.r). In these instances, the hosts say "news consumer" where "citizen," "audience," or even "person" would be a better word choice based on NLP marketing materials, which state that the goal of news literacy is to strengthen democracy. However, the use of consumer-based language, despite being common, reinforces the neoliberal ideology that consumption is the mechanism for participation in modern U.S. democracy.

Checkology® 101 also uses "you the consumer" framing throughout its lessons. For example, in the InfoZones lessons, the host states, "Quality news sources aspire to give you, the consumer, the most relevant and timely information that is available about a subject" (News Literacy Project, n.d.k). Similar language is used three more times in the Practicing Quality Journalism lesson, including when the host tells students, "In this lesson, you'll learn about the standards of quality journalism—what they are and how you, as a news consumer, can identify them—so you can separate fact from fiction in every piece of information you encounter" (News Literacy Project, n.d.w), and later, "In this exercise, you were a reporter, but your job as a news consumer is similar" (News Literacy Project, n.d.x). It is also repeated in the First Amendment and Understanding Bias lessons. This direct reference to students as "you the consumer" situates them as consumers first, not citizens.

Sometimes "consumer" language accurately reflects the role a person plays, such as when a person is making a purchase or consuming a sandwich. No examples of sandwich eating are given in Checkology® 101, but there are lessons about buying and advertising in the Branded Content lesson. In this lesson, students are introduced to the idea of advertising and its

relationship to news. Throughout the lesson, the host refers to consumers, beginning with "most consumers have different expectations for different kinds of information—we generally approach ads differently than we do, say, news" (News Literacy Project, n.d.u). She later states, "and advertisers are also figuring out what kinds of ads will engage and interest consumers, and how to best deliver those pieces to the different groups of consumers they are trying to reach" (News Literacy Project, n.d.v). No substantive differentiation is made in the use of "consumer" language when referring to audiences who are the targets of advertisers versus the people who are reading, watching, and listening to news. This could result from lacking a word to accurately capture the news in a multimedia context. But the use of "consumer" to mean both a news-engaged citizen and an audience with buying power shows this "consumer" language overlaps the citizen and buyer roles, obscuring the citizen element that NLP claims news literacy fills for democracy.

The phrases "news consumers" and "media consumers" are common. However, NLP has the opportunity to not replicate this language, which reinforces capitalist notions of consumption for civil participation, and instead use democracy-based language, yet they have not done so. Instead, the "news consumer" language is compounded by acritical industry perspective-taking that is built into the lessons. For example, in two lessons in Checkology® 101 for middle school (Be the Editor and Practicing Quality Journalism) students are asked to take on the role of news editor to learn about newsworthiness and to play the role of a journalist to learn about the standards of quality journalism, respectively. In both lessons, students do are not asked to critique, evaluate, or analyze the industry; instead, they learn how to operate within it.

Learning about media production is common in MLE, although an analytical lens is often used to help students become more critical media audiences. The divergence from the more

typical approach to media production in MLE is showcased by NLP's limited scrutiny of the news industry in the Check Center Mission for Verifying Social Media Content, in which the discussion of the news and information industry is almost celebratory. In this Check Center Mission, David Clinch, a founding member and former global strategic partnerships and training coordinator for the social media company Storyful (Hare, 2021a), presents online verification skills to students as the necessary prerequisites for working at Storyful. Introducing the activity, Clinch says,

> Before we hire anyone on the editorial side here at Storyful, they have to first show us that they have the skills to verify online content, to identify real or authentic videos and images, and to debunk false ones. In this expert mission, your task will be to prove that you have what it takes to work at Storyful. (News Literacy Project, n.d.y)

Four other times throughout the lesson, Clinch reiterates that students need to demonstrate their online verification skills to show they "have what it takes" to work for Storyful. it may be helpful to demonstrate that news literacy skills can be used professionally, the emphasis on developing the skill set so the student can work at this company further illustrates NLP's departure from democratic participation as a goal of being news literate in favor of showcasing industry, occupation, and private interest.

Throughout the curriculum, reflection on what being news literate means for the community or society is limited. The closest Checkology® lessons get to explaining news literacy as a democratic necessity is in The First Amendment lesson. The host explains why the First Amendment protects various forms of misinformation as the collateral damage from limiting government censorship:

> If we let others decide for us what information is true, we lose the freedom to access all the information we need to make decisions for ourselves, our families, our communities, and our countries. That means that it's up to us, as consumers of news and information, to identify what is true from what is false in the flood of information we encounter every day. That's a big responsibility but it is also a critical part of being a news literate individual. (News Literacy Project, n.d.t)

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In the context of discussing the democratic ideal of freedom of speech, the emphasis remains on consumption and individuals. Through this language of consumerism and the emphasis on the professional utility of news literacy instead of democracy, citizenship, and civic engagement, NLP covertly reinforces a brand of news literacy built on consumerism and individualism, ultimately reinforcing two key tenets of neoliberal capitalism.

Legitimation of Corporate News and Information

Another theme within Checkology® 101 is the legitimation of corporate news as exemplary or model news, as the ideal and acceptable form of news. This supremacy of corporate news manifests in several ways. The focus in lessons is at the national level; little information in the curriculum includes or addresses local news. Instead, the examples in the Checkology® 101 lessons reflect major corporate print and online news organizations such as *The New York Times* (the lessons InfoZones, Democracy's Watchdog, Understanding Bias, Branded Content, and The First Amendment) and *The Washington Post* (InfoZones, Understanding Bias, and Democracy's Watchdog) and multimedia news outlets such as CNN (Democracy's Watchdog, Practicing Quality Journalism, Understanding Bias, and Branded Content), CNBC (InfoZones, Practicing Quality Journalism, and Understanding Bias), NPR (InfoZones and Understanding Bias), and Bloomberg (InfoZones and Understanding Bias). Local news outlets are almost exclusively represented through B-roll of local news affiliates of commercial broadcast networks ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX, which are owned by broadcasting companies such as The E.W. Scripps Company and Sinclair Broadcasting Group. Thus, even the "local" examples are not local independent news organizations but are dependent on corporate models and structures.

Checkology® lesson hosts also reinforce the supremacy of corporate news by their professional roles in affiliation with NLP; in other words, if someone is credible enough to be a news literacy lesson host, their respective news organization must be a credible media outlet. About half of the lesson hosts are identified in the videos as affiliated with corporate news, even though they may no longer be affiliated. Tracie Potts at The Eisenhower Institute at Gettysburg College was at NBC News when she hosted for NLP, Wesley Lowery at CBS News was at *The Washington Post*, Enrique Acevedo was at Univision and is now at *60 Minutes*, Paul Saltzman is at *The Chicago Sun-Times*, Kimberly Strassel is at *The Wall Street Journal*, and Indira Lakshmanan at *National Geographic* was at Bloomberg. In their lessons, the hosts introduce themselves and their professional affiliations. Potts, Acevedo, Saltzman, and Lakshmanan were filmed against the backdrop of their newsrooms. It is not as though NLP was unable to secure qualified hosts outside the commercial news industry. Their non-industry hosts are Renee DiResta, a researcher at the Stanford Internet Observatory; Sam Chaltain, an author and filmmaker; Nicco Mele at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard University; and Emily Withrow at the Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism.

With the emphasis on corporate-owned national news used as examples in lessons and the industry-based hosts representing corporate-owned national news organizations, who has been left out? Locally owned community news, issues news, and other forms of news information, such as zines and community newsletters, are not acknowledged or taught in Checkology® 101 lessons as sources of news. The state of local news is complicated because many local newsrooms closed and opened during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hare, 2021b, 2021c). Even considering this, focusing predominately on news at a national level does not

necessarily reflect how students might be encountering and engaging with news in authentic

environments, such as their homes, where American adults have reported trusting local news

more than national news (Gottfried & Liedke, 2021).

Checkology® is chock-full of contains many authentic news examples. However, a fine

line exists between bringing authentic news examples into the curriculum and the intrusion of

corporation into classroom space. Corporate news media organizations such as *The New York*

Times, Bloomberg, and NBC are evident in the examples and B-roll used to bring course

concepts to life. Social media platforms and technology giant Google also are mentioned by

name. For example, the host of the Arguments and Evidence lesson names Google as a tool she

uses, the Misinformation 101 exercise explains how to fact check using Google, and the host of

Verifying Social Media Content Check Center Mission explains how to use Google for digital

verification. When are these examples illustrative, and when are they tacit endorsements?

Although authentic examples can be valuable, these examples become questionable when

they come from the same media companies that provide funding, sponsor events and projects, or

have journalists hosting the lessons as news literacy experts. When authentic examples prioritize

corporate news, they may delegitimize local news and implicitly endorse corporate news as the

only type of acceptable news, thereby reinforcing capitalist structures in which news and

information are commodified.

The forms of media that NLP includes in its Checkology® 101 lessons reflect how

corporate news (and older Americans) engage with news, not necessarily how young people get

their news and information. The Checkology® curriculum includes examples from Facebook,

Twitter, and (to a much lesser extent) Instagram, where corporate news organizations keep a

social media presence (Common Sense, 2019), to illustrate how to engage with news and

information on social media. Yet these social media platforms are not the ones that many young people prefer and use most often, which are YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram (Pew Research Center, 2018; Piper Sandler, 2020). The emphasis in Checkology® on print and television news also seems to miss the demographic marks of their student audience: less than half of teens report using print news on a regular basis, and even fewer rely on television for news (Common Sense, 2019). Social media are a source of news for more than half of teens; 50% have reported getting news at least weekly from YouTube (Common Sense, 2019). The Checkology® 101 curriculum seems to reflect the corporate understanding of where to people should get their news and information not where young people actually get their news.

Failure to Connect News Literacy with Economics

The Checkology® 101 lessons reflect and reinforce the corporate news system; therefore, although the news literacy curriculum asks students to interrogate news and information, it does not ask students to think critically about the systems of power in which that news and information exist, thus failing to connect news literacy issues with economics.

The Economics of News. The Checkology® curriculum fails to acknowledge that within a capitalist system, news is often an industry, and many types of information have an economic dimension. For example, the InfoZones lesson identifies various types and purposes of information. The lesson host acknowledges that information may be used in multiple ways but stresses that information has a "primary objective or purpose" (News Literacy Project, n.d.g); this view disregards that information can have multiple purposes. In a neoliberal capitalist economic system, information often *is* an industry, so capital acquisition is often an underlying purpose of information. Yet in the NLP curriculum, economics are really only addressed in one way, "to sell," which teaches that the purpose of selling ads is to sell product (but not sell

audiences, as a more critical approach might explain). However, the other purposes identified in the InfoZones lesson have economic dimensions that are ignored.

The purpose "to entertain" is addressed as recreational only, which leaves out that entertainment is an industry. The purpose "to provoke" is explained with the goal to "spark a strong emotional reaction" by using "false or distorted information" (News Literacy Project, n.d.i). While this may be true, it is incomplete because political gain, as seen with foreign actors and domestic politicians online, and economic gain, such as clickbait and other methods that incentivize and monetize viral content, are also purposes of provoking. The InfoZones lesson introduces the purpose "to inform" as follows: "The main purpose here is not to convince you to buy a product or adopt a particular perspective, but to inform you about the events and issues in the world around you" (News Literacy Project, n.d.j). This lesson reinforces the idea that informing does not have economic or political dimensions. But at the same time, the images used in the lesson to illustrate the purpose "to inform" are of corporately owned news media, including Fox Business Network, CBSN, CNBC, MSNBC, Bloomberg, NBC News, and *The Washington Post*. This juxtaposition highlights the unrealistic image that Checkology® paints of informing being the primary purpose of news. Even the exemplars they provide to illustrate the purpose "to inform" are not purely informational but have an economic purpose: to profit. The paucity of reflection on economic influences in news extends to choices made in the newsroom.

Because news is an industry, there are economic decisions that are made. The news industry's dependence on advertising resulted in a professional model that divides the news into an editorial side and a business side separated by a metaphorical firewall. This model is introduced in the Branded Content lesson, which is one of the few examples in which the curriculum acknowledges that news is a business and context is provided through a brief history

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of how the digital revolution changed advertising in news. Although the host says it is important

to think about how ads, news, and other content are related, this issue remains largely unexplored

beyond explaining the current system in which "ads are paying the bills" (News Literacy Project,

n.d.u) for news companies. The lesson introduces various kinds of ads, such as native ads and

sponsored content. The host says that branded content is integrated into news, which is "not a

bad thing in and of itself, but again transparency is important" (News Literacy Project, n.d.v).

Advertising is normalized as the tool that allows for media users to get "free" content.

A critical reflection on the professional news model leads one to question why a

corporate model of news exists at all if news meets a basic need for a functional democracy. The

Branded Content lesson and Checkology® 101 lessons overall do not question the model; it is

accepted, which may be appropriate at this stage because students need to understand the system

of news they will encounter. However, in the lessons in which students could reflect critically on

places where the firewall is ineffective or how the editorial side might still make economic

choices (even if the business department is not enforcing them), the opportunity is not taken. In

the Be the Editor lesson, students are asked to select which stories will be featured in a day and

where they will feature their selected stories in the online news publication. What this lesson

misses is how these editorial decisions are made. Students are expected to make their decisions

based on newsworthiness (a term that is flexible and subject to economic influences), but this

leaves out other very real economic considerations that are embedded in agenda setting.

The idea of corporate bias, which Checkology® explains in the Understanding Bias

lesson, is a way a news organization might change its reporting because of the relationship the

outlet or someone in it has with a business entity. In the Bias Types and Forms Level 1 exercise,

students are asked to identify corporate bias from an example in which a news organization

promotes a flattering story about one of its advertisers. Although this is an example of corporate

bias and does address one way that economic relationships can influence news, it also leaves out

some of the structural aspects that may result in corporate bias, such as ownership,

conglomeration, consolidation, regulation, and policy. Checkology® limits students' exposure to

this aspect of economics to a micro-level, leaving out the macro-level implications.

The Economics of Misinformation. One noticeable gap in the Checkology® approach

to misinformation is its failure to connect misinformation to the platforms that incentivize it for

economic and political gain. The host of the Misinformation lesson says that misinformation

happens for various reasons: "Sometimes it's spread to gain followers; other times it's shared to

get people talking about a given subject. Sometimes false information is shared as a joke, or by

mistake" (News Literacy Project, n.d.q). When introducing false context as a cause of

misinformation, the lesson gets closer to the economic and political incentives of online viral

misinformation:

> False context is also a common tactic of what is called "engagement bait" on social
> media. These accounts share "amazing" pictures to attract attention and to draw as many
> followers as possible. But most of the images shared from these accounts have been taken
> from another context and wrapped in a false story designed to go viral. These accounts
> use engagement bait to boost the spread of their posts on social media—the more likes
> and shares, the wider and larger the audience. (News Literacy Project, n.d.p)

The explanations in both examples omit that the social media platforms where misinformation

thrives incentivize clicks and shares through monetization. Misinformation proliferation online is

not merely about gaining clout or reaching an audience; the presence of an audience creates an

economic benefit for the account holder. Viral content—including misinformation—results in

elevated user interactions that trigger the algorithm to bump that content to the top of the social

feed and generate more clicks, likes, and shares. Content creators whose content drives

interaction on the platform earn a share of advertising profits. Thus, there is a clear discrepancy

between the agnostic version of social media taught in Checkology® and the more accurate reality of the business of social media.

The Gap—What Is Missing

The Checkology® 101 lessons contain little to no critique of the existing social system and structure other than in of the Democracy's Watchdog lesson, in which issues of social justice are addressed through examples of historical and contemporary investigative journalism. The Democracy's Watchdog lesson establishes journalists as those who can investigate wrongdoing by government, corporations, and even other news and media organizations. It highlights a few historical examples of investigative journalism, including Nellie Bly's mental asylum reporting, Ida B. Wells's coverage of lynching, and Seymore Hersh's Mỹ Lai exposé. More current examples are the 2014 *The Los Angeles Times* coverage of migrant labor practices in the United States and Mexico and *The Washington Post* database of police killings. Yet between Bly's exposure of horrific asylum conditions and the Fatal Force project at *The Washington Post,* the news industry has changed. Corporate consolidation and conglomeration, the 24-hour news cycle, the digital revolution, defunding of public media, and austerity measures such as staff reductions and increased reliance on wire services have been ignored. This decontextualized and ahistorical approach provides examples of the so-called watchdog function without establishing that the current news landscape is different now. The Democracy's Watchdog lesson places emphasis on the "free press" and its role in American democracy and freedom. However, the lesson fails to explain what "free" means. In this context, "free" mostly refers to the press being free from government restriction. But this does not acknowledge that news and information are an industry operating within capitalism, so they are not free from the market.

Because the Checkology® 101 lessons mostly do not engage with the economics of news and information as an industry, issues of consolidation, ownership, privacy, algorithmic personalization, big data, policy, and (de)regulation are absent from the Checkology® 101 lessons. The Checkology® 101 curriculum also does not address alternative types of news or alternative, noncorporate funding models. The reason for these omissions could not be determined in the present study because NLP staff could not be interviewed, but some possible reasons are that there were no experts the organization who could create such curriculum, or that this seemed too complicated to introduce to middle and high school students, or that this kind of critical examination would call into question the industry around which this curriculum's version of news literacy was built and to which many of NLP's funders belong. NLP's Checkology® 101 challenges students to think critically but only within the boundaries of the hegemony of corporate journalism.

Conclusion of Curriculum Theory Analysis

This curriculum analysis was conducted with neo-Marxist curriculum theory as a frame to examine how neoliberal capitalism is reinforced or rejected by NLP's Checkology® 101 courses. The analysis showed that neoliberal capitalist ideologies are reinforced throughout the curriculum and not rejected in significant ways. Neoliberal capitalism is replicated through language that positions students as consumers, and this language paired with NLP's rhetoric regarding the importance of news literacy for democracy builds on the notion that consumerism is inextricably linked to democracy.

Neoliberal capitalism is also reinforced through NLP's legitimation of the corporate news model as the standard for what news should be through a reliance on national news as exemplars of news and the exclusion of local news sources beyond the scope of national affiliates. This use

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of corporate examples also suggests endorsement of national news as a metric by which to judge news. The approach of Checkology® 101 to social media reflects corporate strategies for news and information, not typical teenage use. Students are asked to meet news organizations where they are instead of teaching students about online news through social media, which is how most students access news.

The failure to connect news with economics is also another way the neoliberal ideologies are perpetuated through the Checkology® curriculum. Apart from one lesson, the curriculum mostly avoids discussing that news is a business and the implications of that for the country and democracy. In its efforts to improve civil discourse and strengthen democracy, the curriculum seeks to address misinformation online, particularly on social media, but leaves out how social media platforms incentivize misinformation by monetizing viral content.

Findings: Racial Ideologies in Checkology® 101

A series of questions drawn from the literature (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2006; Matsuda et al., 1993, 2003) were used to analyze racial ideologies in Checkology® in consideration with Bergerson's (2003) recommendations for white scholars using CRT. Therefore, these guiding questions (see Chapter IV, Methods) were used to investigate how ideologies about race and racism are implicitly and explicitly constructed and deconstructed through representation and master narratives. These framing questions resulted in three themes in the findings: reductive racial representation, decontextualized images and stories, and adoption of master narratives.

Reductive Racial Representations

Most of the Checkology® lessons are video-based and hosted by an expert who guides students through the lesson ideas and examples. Analysis of the racial representation among the

Checkology® 101 hosts revealed that of the 11 lesson hosts, only four are people of color: Tracie Potts, a Black woman and former national news correspondent; Wesley Lowery, a Black man and print journalist; Enrique Acevedo, a Latino man and broadcast journalist; and Indira Lakshmanan, a biracial journalist of Asian and European descent. Lacking discussion of their racial or ethnic heritage, the remaining seven hosts—three men and four women—can be read as white. The hosts' places of work or areas of expertise were also considered. All hosts from racialized groups are (or were at the time of filming) journalists from major news organizations (NBC, *The Washington Post*, Univision, and *National Geographic*), whereas the white hosts represented more diverse areas of expertise, including news affiliation, education, media companies, and filmmaking. These results support Clark's (1969) model of minority treatment in the media, which suggests that in (fictional) television shows, racialized minority characters are restricted to roles that show them protecting the social order.

The representation of racialized people in the contents of the Checkology® 101 lessons, including video clips, stills, and B-roll, also must be considered. Overall, the Checkology® curriculum is highly visual. The lessons are a series of videos and interactive assessments for students to complete. The B-roll, news clips, and still images include many images of people of various racialized groups and are more complex than mostly white people with strategic diversity for political correctness. However, the number of diverse bodies is immaterial if those representations lack authenticity or depth (Warner, 2017). Thus, the question is not about the quantity of racial and ethnic diversity in the curriculum but the quality of this representation.[4]

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[4] Research shows that racialized groups—meaning those in racial groups other than white—have historically been stereotyped, flattened, or erased in U.S. media representation (Kido Lopez, 2020; Warner, 2017). Thus, this analysis focused on the representations of racialized groups because, considering this history, these representations require attention. An analysis of whiteness was not included, which could be viewed as a limitation of this study; however, that is an opportunity for future research using other related theoretical frames, such as critical whiteness, to extend this work of the present study.

Black Representation. Patterns of the representation of Black people are noticeable in the Checkology® lessons. When analyzing the Black people who are used included as significant subjects or as illustrations or examples (excluding those who are merely in the background of stock footage and B-roll), a clear pattern is of athletes and sports-related representation. This includes LeBron James, Serena Williams, Stephen Curry, Colin Kaepernick, Simone Biles (InfoZones), and Usain Bolt (Branded Content). Although not athletes, Black sports journalists, including Stephen A. Smith (InfoZones), also add to this narrative representing Blackness through sport. This issue is complex because sports are an important avenue through which Black Americans have fought for racial equality and justice and generated wealth, status, celebrity, and opportunity. But by relying on sports to increase diversity in the videos, the Checkology® 101 lessons risk perpetuating harmful racial stereotypes and stories, such as the jock archetype or the natural talent myth.

Another notable pattern of Black representation in the Checkology® 101 lesson videos is depictions of civil rights unrest and violence being committed against Black people. Various lessons include substantive imagery of lynching (Democracy's Watchdog), the raising of the confederate flag—a white supremacist hate symbol—in the 2017 Charlottesville riot (Understanding Bias), Black women protesting (Democracy's Watchdog), 1960s civil rights rallies (Democracy's Watchdog), and Rosa Parks (Misinformation). Of course, civil rights are a real part of Black history and American history and are a contemporary issue. However, as with the stereotypes surrounding athletes, there is a danger in limiting Black representation to scenarios of trauma and unrest.

A few other types of Black representation are found in the Checkology® 101 lessons, including First Lady Michelle Obama (Misinformation); Black news anchors, including two

lesson hosts (e.g., InfoZones); young Black boys in a library (The First Amendment); and a clip

from ABC Family's *The Fosters* (InfoZones). If these other Black representations are in the

curriculum, why are themes of sports and civil rights problematic enough to be mentioned?

Because the amount of Black representation in the Checkology® 101 lessons is already limited, a

trend in visual representation of Black Americans mostly through sports and struggle is

reductive, limited, and cause for question regarding *how* Black Americans are being represented,

not just *if* they are being represented.

Asian Representation. Like Black representation, Asian representation is limited—

arguably even more so in quantity—so the content and themes within that representation become

even more important. The predominant themes in Asian representation in these lessons are

victim and threat. The examples of violence are in the Democracy's Watchdog lesson, which

includes images and a case summary of the 1968 Mỹ Lai massacre. The video segment

addressing the massacre is graphic enough to be restricted based on YouTube community

guidelines.

In contrast, Asians are also represented as a threat to white American life. For example,

the Understanding Bias lesson includes a sustained still image of a newspaper with the headline,

"U.S. judge rejects claim Harvard discriminated against Asian-American applicants," referring to

a 2019 anti-affirmative action lawsuit. In another example, the threat motif manifests as the

threat of Chinese communism in the Check Center Mission: Evaluating Sources Online. In this

exercise, students are asked to evaluate the credibility of an article from *The People's Daily*, the

newspaper from the Chinese Communist Party, about a Chinese rocket. The lesson feedback

informs students that the source is not trustworthy because it is affiliated with a communist

government and is political propaganda. Although this claim may be true, the limited number of

Asian examples in the curriculum means that each example and its valence are more important. Examples such as this rocket article can reinforce existing media narratives and commonly held stereotypes of China as a threat (Zhang, 2015). It is also problematic that government involvement with news is considered dangerous when referring to communist China, but other government-supported news media, such as Canada's CBC, were not scrutinized or identified as less trustworthy.

Another branch of the threat theme is the prevalence of references to China and COVID-19 in the Conspiratorial Thinking lesson. This lesson, made in response to the post-Trump, post-COVID media landscape, lists a variety of conspiracy theories about the pandemic, including that it was created and accidentally released by the Chinese government. Students are also asked in the Conspiratorial Thinking lesson to respond to a question about the "false idea that the Chinese government intentionally developed the strain of coronavirus that causes COVID-19 as part of a secret bioweapons program." Although in the lesson these conspiracy theories are identified as false, the limited Asian representation puts additional weight on the content and quality of the representation. In Checkology® 101 lessons, the scope and breadth of Asian representation in subject positions is limited to violence against Vietnamese and threats associated with China. This is, undoubtedly, reductive at best for national and international Asian representation.

Latino Representation. Latino representation is even more limited in the Checkology® 101 lessons than Black and Asian representation. In the lessons, themes of scandal and poverty arise in the B-roll, news clips, and still images where Latinos are the focal point on screen. A screenshot of an NPR article about corrupt Puerto Rican government officials appears in the Understanding Bias lesson, and the Misinformation lesson highlights an article from *The Los*

Angeles Times about lynchings in Mexico fueled by viral fake news. In the Democracy's

Watchdog lesson, Checkology® introduces a 2014 investigative piece from *The Los Angeles*

Times called "Product of Mexico" about the abusive treatment of laborers in the Mexican

agriculture industry. The B-roll and still images in this video segment include videos of laborers

on the backs of trucks, workers picking fruit trees and unpacking crates, and people bathing in a

river and sitting around a table in dirty conditions with little food. Are these real stories?

Certainly, but the representation of Latinos is so limited that it reinforces stereotypes about

Mexican poverty across a group of people. Beyond one additional clip in the InfoZones lesson of

a news report showcasing young Latino and other students of color BIPOC students speaking out

at a rally against teacher layoffs, the Latino representation is miniscule and myopic.

Indigenous Peoples and Native Americans. Unsurprisingly, Indigenous peoples and

Native Americans are rendered nearly invisible in the Checkology® 101 lessons. The

representation of this diverse racialized group as the focus of B-roll, news clips, and still images

is limited to two instances. The Understanding Bias lesson includes a viral image from a 2019

Washington, D.C. protest in which a white teen in a red Make American Great Again hat

appeared to face off with a Native American man. In the lesson, the image is accompanied by a

still shot of a headline from *The Atlantic*: "The media botched the Covington Catholic story."

The other instance, found in the Democracy's Watchdog lesson, is in the 1997 Pulitzer Prize–

winning story "Tribal Housing: From Deregulation to Disgrace" by Alex Tizon, Eric Nadler, and

Deborah Nelson. The story addresses the government's financial mismanagement of funds for

low-income Native American housing. Although this important story highlights governmental

corruption and systemic abuses against Native Americans, its use within the Checkology® 101

lessons—when there is barely any other native or indigenous representation—reinforces a stereotype of impoverishment.

Within this highly visual curriculum, there are many faces of people from racialized groups. However, in analyzing the B-roll, news clips, and still images in which these people are the focus for illustrating a concept and not merely background filler, simple quantity is not enough to guarantee meaningful, positive representation. In all these cases, the Checkology® curriculum highlights important stories of systemic oppression within each racial group: Black American's ongoing movement for civil rights, violence and imperialism against various Asian nations by Americans in the name of anti-communism, labor abuses in Latin America, and the legacy of corruption and abuse of Native Americans by the U.S. government. However, with so little representation of each racial group within the curriculum, these examples intended to highlight social justice issues may perpetuate singular stories and reinforce stereotypes. Well-meaning liberal goals to increase representation may increase numbers but not actually provide quality or meaningful representation. The Checkology® 101 lessons appear to have fallen into that trap. With such limited racial representation in the curriculum, it is essential to contextualize the images and stories of racialized groups that are included must be given appropriate context. Reductive racial representations are often accompanied by decontextualization of images and stories.

Decontextualized Images and Stories

The social construction thesis, a central tenet of CRT, posits that race and racism are not natural but the result of social constructions of the context in which they are built (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Therefore, CRT emphasizes the importance of contextualizing and historicizing stories and information to capture their embedded social relations; the underlying assumption is

that people cannot fully understand stories and information without context because social relations of the time and place of those stories are integral for sense-making. Although he was not a CRT scholar, Postman (1985/2005) also wrote of the danger of decontextualized stories and information in media. He wrote that the form and structure of televised news results in fragmented information presented without context or connection to the serious conditions and stories they represent, rendering television news a form of commercial entertainment. The necessity of context to fully capture the social relations of a story and the lack of context in televised news formats used by mainstream news made it essential to analyze how Checkology® 101 handles context for the stories, images, and information used to build and supplement its lessons. NLP's dependency on news structures and forms results in decontextualized and ahistoricized stories and images that are disconnected from their larger sociopolitical histories. This occurs through unexplained images and simplified stories.

Unexplained Images. The Checkology® 101 lessons are highly visual, which, in many visual and stylistic ways, reflects broadcast news reports. For example, the lessons introduce material to students with supporting B-roll and still images to illustrate the concepts the host explain; on-screen text and graphics highlight key information. However, many of the supporting images and footage are used as illustrations for lesson concepts but left unexplained. NLP does not contextualize many of the still images and B-roll used behind voiceovers, disconnecting the reality of the images from their use in the lessons, particularly for race-based issues.

Images of violence and civil dissent are used but provided little to no context or explanation. One example is the introduction to host Wesley Lowery in the Democracy's Watchdog lesson.[5] As Lowery says, "I write stories about law enforcement, justice, and

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[5] Compared with the other Checkology® 101 lessons, the Democracy's Watchdog lesson provides the most context for the stories and issues it introduces through case studies and histories.

sometimes injustice. An essential part of my job is to question authority" (News Literacy Project, n.d.c), images of white police in riot gear, antipolice protestors, street-side memorials, a cop holding a man on the ground next to a car, and a newspaper headline about police killings flash on the screen. No text features or voiceovers explain the time, place, or circumstances of the images used to illustrate Lowery's introduction; they are plucked out of their context and dropped into the video. Similarly, in the InfoZones lesson, students are shown images centered on Colin Kaepernick's peaceful protest with little context to explain the issue or opportunity for discussion about it; instead, students are asked to identify which of the images is meant to "provoke" the viewer. After students select their answer, the post-answer pop-up message notes that all the images "may have elicited an emotional reaction," but it fails to address what those might be or why; it does not contextualize, unpack, or explain the discourse surrounding a race-based, anti-Black imagery. Both examples—police brutality and Kaepernick's kneeling—were divisive at the time and continue to be so today, filled with nuance and social relations that are not fully acknowledged in the lessons.

Inflammatory viral content also shows up out of context in some Checkology® 101 lessons. Although NLP does a commendable job of identifying content as false, fabricated, or manipulated in the Misinformation lesson, less attention is given to contextualizing the content used. Students are shown manipulated content throughout the lesson, including marquees that read "Trump made America the best country in the nation," and "Allah be praised. America we will kill you all and nothing you can do to stop it. Allah be praised." These images are marked as fake, but the lesson provides no context for or discussion about the fabricated images, the time or place they came from, or the real bodily harm that results from these kinds of messages. Instead

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of considering these aspects of manipulated content, students are asked to explain how images like these are vulnerable to manipulation.

Other divisive but decontextualized examples in the curriculum are the inclusion of extremist partisan politics. In a video clip of Jason Kander's U.S. senate advertisement used in the InfoZones lesson, he is holding a rifle (News Literacy Project, n.d.l). No context is provided about him, the political race, or its outcome. Divisive political commentators are also shown with little context other than the news literacy concept they are dropped into for illustration. A clip of Ben Shapiro rejecting comparisons of Nazi policies to the Trump administration followed by commentary from MSNBC's Rachel Maddow is used in an InfoZones video about persuasion (News Literacy Project, n.d.h). Later in the lesson, a clip of far-right political commentator Tomi Lahren is used to illustrate opinion (News Literacy Project, n.d.m). A clip of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones of *InfoWars* is used to illustrate propaganda, and although Jones's diatribe is identified as an example of propaganda, the footage includes audio of Jones falsely stating, "Sandy Hook is a synthetic, completely fake, with actors, in my view" (News Literacy Project, n.d.n), before fading out. In every example, divisive political commentary is used, but who the commentator is, what they are talking about, and why they are talking about it is not addressed.

Maybe the most severe example of extremist politics is the inclusion of white supremacy recruitment materials in the InfoZones lesson to illustrate propaganda. As the host's voiceover says, "Propaganda can be flat out dangerous. It may influence the decisions people make, which in turn influences their actions" (News Literacy Project, n.d.n), white supremacy and neo-Nazi imagery is shown, including posters from Vanguard America that read "White Guilt: Free Yourself from Cultural Marxism," "We have a right to exist," and "Defending your people is a social duty, not an anti-social crime." Other examples include a poster of a white woman that

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reads "Tired of anti-white propaganda? Stand up for yourself" and a poster with a statue of Caesar from neo-Nazi group Identity Evropa that reads "Serve your People." These images are included in the propaganda section, so the implicit and explicit message is that these examples are harmful. The argument here is not that these real and important issues should be ignored; their inclusion is important. However, using a CRT framework to analyze the Checkology® 101 curriculum shows that it is essential for these images and examples to be contextualized to help students understand the complexity and social relations in which they were constructed. In the current curriculum, they simply are not.

   Simplified Stories. According to CRT, one danger of not contextualizing stories and information is the tendency to universalize experiences. CRT scholars posit that experiences are not universal because of the systems of power, namely race, that privilege some while limiting others in both visible and invisible ways. Thus, people who follow the same path may have different experiences because of intersecting systems of oppression embedded in society. In the Checkology® 101 lessons, this becomes evident in the way various stories are oversimplified and rewritten by lacking context and embracing universalism. A primary example is historical erasure in The First Amendment lesson. The host discusses the 1787 Constitutional Convention as a point at which the framers decided to leave rights out of the Constitution and allow the Senate to add them later "to guarantee individual rights to all Americans" in a document "known as the Bill of Rights, a collection of individual rights guaranteed to all of us" (News Literacy Project, n.d.s). This is backed by B-roll showing a painting of the Convention, which included only white men. In simplifying this story by removing it from its historical, social, political, and economic context, the lesson rewrites American history. It does not address that only property-owning white men counted as the Americans to whom these rights applied at that time and for

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decades to come. There is no discussion included about who this left out, such as women, people of color, Indigenous peoples, and prisoners.

The Democracy's Watchdog lesson provides markedly more context than other lessons in the Checkology® 101 courses, but it also illustrates how limited or weak context still can perpetuate universalization, master narratives, and whitewashing. An example is the written case study of Ida B. Wells's 1890s investigation of lynchings.

> Through her investigative reporting on lynchings across the South, Ida B. Wells exposed that Black men were being lynched on the basis of false claims made with the purpose of maintaining a White supremacist social order. Wells raised public awareness of the injustices of lynching, contributing to the eventual eradication of the crime.

It is commendable that NLP names these acts as ones of white supremacy and does not use a more palatable descriptor that erases whiteness from the crimes. However, this description paints an incomplete picture of lynching. By suggesting that lynching was eradicated, it this description may create the false impression that eradication occurred soon after Wells's reports, whereas documented lynchings continued well into the 1960s, and some argue that the lynching of Black people in the United States continues to this day (McLaughlin, 2020; NAACP, n.d.).

Another example of misrepresentation due to incomplete context in the Democracy's Watchdog lesson is the written case study about Moses Newson's civil rights coverage during the 1950s and 1960s.

> Moses Newson, a Black reporter working in Memphis, Tennessee, and Baltimore, Maryland, covered many of the significant events of the civil rights movement, including the murder of Emmett Till, school desegregation and the 1961 Freedom Rides. Newson's coverage helped Americans understand and sympathize with the goals of the civil rights movement.

Like the piece on Wells, this example provides specific details—the names of the events Newson covered—but also lacks context when addressing the impact of Newson's work. As written, it seems that Newson's reporting shifted the public position at the time, which is false; the civil

rights movement was largely unpopular at the time and began to gain public favor only years later (Roper Center, n.d.).

In other examples throughout the Checkology® 101 courses, the lessons address important social issues, including the #MeToo Movement and COVID misinformation and conspiracy theories. However, as with the Wells and Newson case studies, each of these issues lacks contexts and misrepresents important sociopolitical aspects of them. The Checkology® 101 case study of the #MeToo Movement in the Democracy's Watchdog lesson attributes the movement to investigations about Harvey Weinstein, erasing founder Tarana Burke from the narrative. The Conspiratorial Thinking lesson addresses COVID-19–related disinformation, citing it as fake or false. Yet the impacts of these conspiracies are not connected to the sociopolitical context in which they occurred and the real-life implications of these lies. The Conspiratorial Thinking lesson leaves out that anti-Asian hate crimes resulted from COVID-19–related disinformation.

Many of these examples are partial stories. Compared with other curriculum, NLP has made progress in talking about and including pressing social issues, particularly racism. But many of the stories and issues included in the lessons are decontextualized, simplified, and therefore incomplete. Particularly regarding racism, the Checkology® 101 lessons include language that reflects current efforts to reject white supremacy and work toward antiracism, but these lessons at the same time recycle revisionist and incomplete U.S. histories that encapsulate the white, liberal master narrative that are needed to justify the story of the United States and leave untouched the systems and structures that benefit the established currents of power.

Master Narratives

Through a critique of liberalism, CRT theorists assume that neutrality, meritocracy, objectivity, and colorblindness are used to uphold ideals of fairness and equality that ultimately hide and reify white privilege. These theorists then seek to understand how objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness, and meritocracy uphold a system of oppression. Efforts to achieve objectivity or colorblindness normalize whiteness and white supremacy while the intercentricity of race in U.S. social systems makes actual objectivity unachievable and undesirable. CRT is a challenge to these ideologies and the master narratives they perpetuate. In examining if and how these ideologies function in the Checkology® 101 lessons, three distinct themes became evident: the issue of the default, the supremacy of professional standards, and the role and regulation of expertise and evidence.

The Issue of the Default. Throughout the Checkology® 101 lessons, there are instances in the hosts' scripts and the written material that generalize Americans by making assumptions about how people think, what they do, and their opinions. Making universalized statements does not account for culture, race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or ability. These generalizations create a universalized version of an American, which ultimately reflects the dominant (i.e., white) experience and disregards other experiences and ways of knowing. For example, in the Democracy's Watchdog lesson, the host says, "Without journalists … the American people would be largely kept in the dark. They wouldn't have the information they need to make informed decisions that hold powerful people and organizations accountable for their actions" (News Literacy Project, n.d.d).

Although this statement appears reasonable, further consideration revealed some problematic assumptions. The idea explicitly states that journalism is the only source for

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knowing about oppression, but what about the value in knowing from the experiences of those who live through such subjugation? The implication here is that people (generally) would not know about issues or problems because they are not experiencing them. But people who are unaware of systemic issues are also those who are privileged by social systems: those who are white, male, and wealthy. The events that occurred after George Floyd was murdered illustrate this point; liberal white people "discovered" that racism was a problem, an issue that was not news to communities of color in the United States.

Other examples of this issue of universalizing in the Checkology® 101 lessons are assumptions about what "we" or most or many people do or experience or think. In What Is News? (News Literacy Project, n.d.r), the host states, "A lot of what happens every day wouldn't be newsworthy to *most people* [emphasis added]." In The First Amendment (News Literacy Project, n.d.t), the host says, "The First Amendment is complicated. It protects some things which *many people* [emphasis added] would consider to be bad, such as burning the American flag to express an opinion or refusing to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance during school." The InfoZones lesson claims, "Whether you realize it or not, news is the primary way we learn what's going on around us" (News Literacy Project, n.d.k). There is universalizing of what many or most people think in these cases. The audience is not given evidence to qualify these statements beyond what is imagined or considered the default or universal opinion, which almost always reflects the perspectives of the white majority. To avoid universalizing, the host in the What Is News? lesson could easily have shifted the emphasis, instead acknowledging that there is so much information people must sift through every day that it would be impossible for all of it to be newsworthy. The First Amendment lesson could easily have shifted language to identify that *some* people find these actions bad, but others do not.

Race is specifically of concern when considering universalizing statements or concepts. The Democracy's Watchdog lesson provides an in-depth case study of Ida B. Wells: "In the late 19th century, newspapers were the sole source of news for most Americans—and there were few, if any, ways for readers to verify whether their reporting was accurate and unbiased." Generalizing words such as "most" re-create a universal history for Americans that is inaccurate. In 1870, just before Wells's reporting, 20% of the total U.S. population over age 14 was illiterate; 11.5% of whites were illiterate, while 79.9% of racial minorities were illiterate (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993). Thus, the presumption that "most" people received their news from newspapers is more accurately stated as most white people received their news from newspapers. Even this statement does not account for people who could not afford to buy a newspaper or whose communities did not have access to a newspaper or the roles that oral culture and tradition play in sharing news and information. Through the lens of CRT, universalism discounts racialized experiences and normalizes white experiences as the default, as illustrated by these examples from the Checkology® 101 lessons.

Supremacy of Professional Standards. In the Checkology® 101 lessons, the professional standards and codes to which most of the news industry subscribes are invoked as the standards by which news literate people should measure their news and information. These standards, as outlined in the Practicing Quality Journalism lesson, are multiple credible sources, verification of information, avoidance of bias, balance, documentation, context, and fairness. Students are told that "reputable news organizations" (News Literacy Project, n.d.ff) rely on these standards, a code of ethics, and style guides to ensure quality reporting and because standards "designed to promote fairness, transparency, and accuracy" (News Literacy Project, n.d.b) and. Embedded within these standards are objectivity, neutrality, and fairness. These

tenets are also the ideals of positivism and liberalism that the CRT framework identifies as tools of master narratives that uphold white supremacy.

The Checkology® 101 lessons have a conflicted relationship with objectivity. Throughout the lessons there are places where objectivity is embraced and other places where it is rejected. For example, the InfoZones lessons explain that the purpose of documenting information is to capture information without context, without changing it or explaining it. In suggesting that documentation does not have or require context or that what is documented is not an interpretation or choice, the lesson reinforces objectivity, that information can exist in a vacuum without influence of any kind. Later in the lesson, students are warned to "be careful" because raw data may seem to tell the whole story but it "leaves out facts and other pieces of context" (News Literacy Project, n.d.o). In the Practicing Quality Journalism lesson, students are asked to identify how to verify a source's statement; the correct answer is to use "an analysis from an independent, objective source." Here again, objectivity is the "right" answer. But later in the Understanding Bias lesson, the host says that objectivity is not achievable because we all have a perspective and experiences; instead, journalists need to be "impartial" to mitigate biases. some credit is due for the acknowledgement that objectivity is likely unattainable, replacing the goal of objectivity with the goal of impartiality is merely replacing it with a synonym. How is impartiality functionally different from objectivity? NLP's ambivalence around objectivity indicates just how integrated the notion is in journalism industry standards; if it were not, NLP would simply reject it and move on. Instead, Checkology® 101 leans into the concepts of neutrality and bias.

NLP includes neutrality as another ideal of news that a news literate person should seek out. However, the references to neutrality are not significantly different than calling for

objectivity. "You should expect news to report verified, fact-based information in a manner that is as neutral or unbiased as possible" (News Literacy Project, n.d.k). "A news story should have as neutral a tone as possible. Remember the purpose of a straight news report is to give you enough information to make your own reasoned decisions about a subject" (News Literacy Project, n.d.ff). Whether objectivity, impartiality, or neutrality, the goal is the same: to avoid bias. What does Checkology® 101 say about bias?

NLP devotes an entire lesson to bias. In the Understanding Bias lesson, the host states that the "vast majority of journalists who produce straight news work really hard to keep bias out of their coverage" (News Literacy Project, n.d.aa) by adhering to professional standards. The lesson also provides a list of biases and how they can manifest in reporting, including partisan bias, demographic bias, corporate bias, neutrality bias, big story bias, framing, fairness and balance in coverage, tone, story selection, and sourcing. The important point here is not the recognition of bias but the ways in which it is used as a mechanism to doubt or discredit what counts as quality or reliable news. These biases also are addressed in the lesson with emphasis on individual journalists making choices and individual readers interpreting those choices. This psychologizes and internalizes bias; it does not acknowledge how bias occurs at systemic levels.

The Checkology® 101 lessons acknowledge but largely avoid any deeper examination of systemic bias. The host of the Understanding Bias lesson acknowledges that a leading way to mitigate bias is to diversify the newsroom.

> One of the best ways to minimize the influence of individual biases at a news organization is to ensure that the newsroom is diverse—that it's made up of people of different genders and races and from different socioeconomic, religious, educational, and ideological backgrounds. This helps ensure the coverage produced by that newsroom represents as broad a range of life experiences as possible. Unfortunately, a lack of diversity remains a problem in most newsrooms across the country, as it is in many other institutions. (News Literacy Project, n.d.cc)

Behind this statement, B-roll with images of Black and white men and women plays, followed by graphics showing the gender and racial breakdowns. The graphics indicate considerable gender and racial disparities in U.S. newsrooms. It is excellent that NLP acknowledges the importance of newsroom diversity, but NLP stops at acknowledgment without depth. What are the effects of diversity and lack of diversity? Whose voices are missing when journalists do not reflect their readership or viewership? Why does this imbalance happen? The inclusion of "educational" and "ideological" diversity in this list of ways to increase representation in the newsroom should cause pause. Citing ideological difference is often a tool used by white communities to justify or achieve diversity without engaging people who experience different lived realities due to race, gender, class, and ability.

From an analytical CRT viewpoint, the problematic element for Checkology® 101 lessons is that they use the standards that accept information as credible only if it is from a dispassionate source, a disinterested perspective, or a detached journalist. These standards are endorsed by the industry, and NLP does not critique or challenge them. Because NLP uses the standards of the industry as the standards for evaluating news, the Checkology® 101 lessons reinforce the position that one's subjectivity can be abandoned. In doing so, NLP implicitly endorses the dominant or mainstream viewpoint, which in the United States means a white perspective. Fundamentally, CRT is a challenge to the epistemology on which the news industry is built. The closest the Checkology® 101 lessons get to engaging with the notion that knowledge and information are socially constructed is when one of the hosts says, "Ask yourself these questions: What does it really mean for coverage to lean right or left? What is the center, anyway? And who gets to decide?" (News Literacy Project, n.d.bb). However, the questions are largely unexplored and remain rhetorical.

Role and Regulation of Expertise and Evidence. NLP's reliance on the seven

journalistic standards they have identified is evident in the curriculum's emphasis on expertise

and evidence. In the Checkology® 101 lessons, at various points students are directed to trust

only those sources that are reliant on the standards used by corporate news. For example, the

InfoZones lesson says that most of the information on the internet is unreliable because it is

"unverified: has not been checked for accuracy by an editor or an expert" (News Literacy

Project, n.d.e). The point made here is that a story's credibility comes from approval by a

credentialed or approved expert. This view is in opposition to the value of storytelling in CRT

because it diminishes personal experience and disproportionately reinforces the idea that power

in telling stories or sharing information rests in the hands of those who already have institutional

power. Questions remain as to who holds the power to determine who qualifies as an expert and

when (and which) people are allowed to be experts of their own experience, which brings into

focus Checkology® 101 lessons regarding eyewitness experts.

Students are cautioned against trusting eyewitness sources, and this caution is in service

to impartiality and neutrality. The Practicing Quality Journalism lesson explains that people who

are involved in a story may want to hide, mislead, or have a limited perspective; therefore, news

literate people should "be careful not to take everything these sources say as fact without

confirming the details" (News Literacy Project, n.d.w). While this may seem intuitive, one only

needs to consider the roles that experts have played, even recently, in discrediting valid

information in newsworthy events and the impacts eyewitness accounts have had a major impact

on bringing truth to light. Police, often considered credible sources by mainstream news and

even included as an official source in the Practicing Quality Journalism lesson, have repeatedly

made false claims to justify brutality against Black and Brown people. Eyewitnesses and their

videos of police brutality have challenged the official source narrative, even if they have not

resulted in legal justice, for George Floyd, Walter Scott, Philando Castile, Oscar Grant, Michael

Brown, and many others.

The industry's emphasis on evidence is also noticeable in Checkology® 101, specifically

regarding the *kinds* of evidence that are prioritized or valued over others. Eyewitness sources are

not considered valuable forms of evidence. Instead, personal observation and emotion are

trumped by quantified information. The Democracy's Watchdog lesson includes a written

section about the Fatal Force reporting in *The Washington Post*.

> David Klinger, a criminology professor at the University of Missouri–St. Louis and a
> former police officer said, "Without data, we can't have an intelligent conversation"
> about policing. And before the [national police killings] database, there were no solid
> facts about police shootings.

This position on what counts and does not count as valid, meaningful, or reliable information

dismisses personal narratives, community experiences, and lived histories as data because these

kinds of information are not considered accepted or valid form of information. The more

qualitative types of information are also not accepted as "solid facts" by a system reliant on

standards of knowing informed by liberalism. People have, in point of fact, lost loved ones from

police killings, but the metric used by the industry and reinforced in the Checkology® 101

lessons does not see consider these facts legitimate information.

In the Arguments and Evidence lesson, students are asked to choose an argument based

on evidence. One choice is a teacher's personal experience regarding banning phones in school,

and the other is an article that includes statistics from the Pew Research Center. The article with

statistics is identified as the "argument based on evidence," whereas the teacher's insights are

noted as including "only a personal observation." The CRT framework challenges the notion of

what counts as evidence through its embrace of storytelling. The discounting of personal

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experience as less credible than measured statistics reinforces white, Western modes of logic and reason while dismissing other ways of knowing and understanding.

Conclusion of CRT Analysis

CRT was used as a framework to analyze NLP's curriculum, thus exposing some inadequacies of the Checkology® 101 lessons. Although the overall representation of racialized minority groups is commendable in quantity, the quality of those representations is problematic. In the B-roll and still images in which racialized people are the subject or focal point, representations of Black people are limited and centered around sports and civil unrest. Asian representation is even more limited and focused on threats and violence. Latino and Native American representations are further limited, with Latino images primarily showing poverty and Native Americans facing symbolic erasure.

This analysis also showed that throughout the Checkology® 101 lessons, context is missing for the images and information introduced to students. From images of violence to extremist partisan politics to neo-Nazi imagery, the Checkology® 101 lessons fail to provide a full perspective on what students are seeing. Lack of context also results in oversimplification of historical events and an overall fragmentation of information. Checkology® 101 lessons include many social justice issues considered controversial, such as racism, but because they lack context, the stories surrounding these issues are partial, creating a revisionist history and the justification needed for accepting and supporting existing U.S. systems of power.

Master narratives also are reinforced through universalization of the American experience. Even as the curriculum challenges objectivity, this concept is replaced with others that merely replicate objectivity in practice. Subjectivity and bias are viewed as problems, illustrating how Checkology® 101 lessons rely on professional journalism standards to be the

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same standards by which news literate readers evaluate news. Evidence and expertise are taught to reflect a certain type of fact or data aligned with the liberal ideals of the disinterested scientist.

Does some of this analysis seem small or trivial? Maybe. But the points of analysis must be considered collectively, not independently, as evidence of how even well-meaning liberal approaches can unintentionally reinforce existing structures of power. Most of the issues could be addressed with another sentence or two in the videos or written segments of the lessons. This critique is not meant to imply that the Checkology® 101 courses are *bad*. The lessons provide students with guidance on some ways to think about news and media, and students may or may not accept that instruction, just as teachers may or may not tailor their instruction to address some of the issues highlighted in this critique. However, these lessons are imperfect, and those imperfections matter. The Checkology® 101 lessons—as a collective media text that exists as part of the larger historical, social, political, and cultural narrative that is communicated in and out of schooling—reinforce existing logics and lines of reasoning that disproportionately benefit white-centric systems and structures of power.

Conclusion

The critical curriculum analysis of the Checkology® had two parts. The form of Checkology® was critiqued by analyzing its structure and organization. Although the Checkology® 101 lessons are interactive, visually appealing, and user friendly, they do not require teacher engagement, lack discursive elements, and do not spiral or integrate course material across lessons. This form isolates news literacy skills and keeps these skills from being implemented in an authentic way.

The content of the Checkology® 101 courses was critique within two analytical frameworks. A neo-Marxist curriculum theory lens gave insight into how neoliberal capitalist

ideologies are replicated or rejected in the curriculum. The analysis showed that neoliberal capitalist ideologies are reinforced throughout the curriculum and are not rejected in significant ways. This occurs through various means, including the use of consumer-focused language, reliance on corporate news as the most legitimate standard for news, and a failure to connect the news industry with its economic realities.

The CRT framework was used to analyze how racist ideologies are perpetuated or challenged in the Checkology® 101 lessons. Even with increased quantities of racial representation, the content of those representations is problematic, resulting in stereotypical images and symbolic erasure. Context is missing for many of the images and information to which students are introduced, resulting in an overall fragmentation of information through disjointed imagery and oversimplification of historical events. Master narratives in the curriculum also are reinforced through universalizing the American experience and reinforcing liberal ideals of objectivity and neutrality.

Overall, NLP's Checkology® 101 courses do not critique social systems through its news literacy lessons. Instead, these lessons reinforce the status quo of corporate-owned news as the standard on which news literacy is built. Because of this, neoliberal capitalism and white supremacy remain fundamentally unchallenged as students learn a form of news literacy that operates within the hegemonic structures of corporate journalism.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The logical implication of the theory of base and superstructure is that the economy must be changed, along with schools, in order to fundamentally transform education. For radical educators, this would mean that, rather than trying to change society solely (mostly) through our pedagogy, we need to be involved in struggles for economic justice and democracy in our communities, in our unions, and in solidarity with other workers who are fighting back.
—Sarah Knopp, *Education and Capitalism: Struggles for Learning and Liberation*

Introduction

As mis- and disinformation continue to proliferate and as media and news literacy education continue to be offered as solutions to maintain and protect democracy, media and news literacy education must be analyzed to understand if and how these curricula serve the democratic ends they are intended to serve. This means interrogating if and how media and news literacy approaches reinforce or reject systems of oppression. In the present study, the presence of racist and capitalist ideologies was examined in the curriculum from NLP, one of the largest news literacy education nonprofit organizations. This chapter includes a summary of the research project and its major findings, answers to the research questions, and limitations and subsequent opportunities for future research. Recommendations for future critical news literacy projects are also included.

Summary of the Research

This study began with a review of the literature to establish the organizing concepts of neoliberal capitalism, race, MLE, and news literacy; their shared connections; and gaps in the published research. Because critical theory underlies this study, the literature review also provided historical and social contexts so the organizing concepts could be understood within their place and time. Research into MLE, the social phenomenon examined here, began with a

brief history of MLE and a discussion of its current state. Three general approaches to MLE were identified as were criticisms of these approaches. News media literacy as a subfield of MLE was examined more closely. News literacy, with emphasis on locating and analyzing, is largely accepted by those who study, endorse, and teach in this field as necessary for full civic participation and a healthy democracy.

The literature addressed race and neoliberal capitalism, two of the many social systems under which MLE must operate. Race and racism were defined for use in the present study, and brief histories and current problems of racism in U.S. education and news media were outlined. Literature definitions of neoliberal capitalism were examined through a brief history and account of its trajectory in the United States and its function as an ideology, and review of neoliberal capitalism in education addressed the market-focused economistic changes precipitated by this ideology. Various researchers have illustrated how racism and neoliberal capitalism work together in and through education to reinforce the neoliberal capitalist ideology necessary to maintain systemic racial inequality and the racist ideology that justify neoliberal capitalism.

After reviewing the literature, highlighting critiques of embedded racist and capitalist logics in MLE, and introducing the prominent nonprofit news literacy organization NLP, four research questions were generated:

RQ$_1$: What is the News Literacy Project's political economic structure?

RQ$_2$: How and in what ways does News Literacy Project's news literacy curriculum challenge and reinforce neoliberal capitalism?

RQ$_3$: How and in what ways does News Literacy Project's news literacy curriculum challenge and reinforce racism?

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RQ$_4$: In what ways does corporate support (both financial and non-financial) affect non-profit news literacy education at News Literacy Project?

To answer these the questions, three theoretical frameworks based on the critical tradition were used for analysis and interpretation: CPEoC, curriculum theory, and CRT. A critical political economy approach was used to uncover how political and economic systems function in and through media to exert power and to provide context for ideology in cultural products and cultural production. This analysis helped to explain the how and why of ideological processes, not just the what of ideology, directed attention to material conditions, and provided a useful counterbalance to textual analysis. Curriculum theory was used to interrogate how power and oppression function across various and intersecting dimensions of education by acknowledging that schooling as a social, economic, political, and cultural institution enables systems of power and oppression. The lens of curriculum theory also probed the roll curricula play within this process. CRT provided a framework through which to examine implicit and explicit manifestations of racism and the intersections of media and education as institutions.

Collectively, these theoretical lenses critique liberal ideals. In this study, the professional tenets of neoliberal education and professional news journalism—objectivity, neutrality, meritocracy, and unbiased truth—as presented in NLP's news literacy curriculum were challenged. These theories also were useful for investigating the ways that NLP's organization and news literacy education curriculum implicitly and explicitly reinforce and reject racist and neoliberal capitalist ideologies and how that is influenced by the organization's structure. Through use of CRT, curriculum theory, and CPEoC, the interdependence of racism and capitalism in this educational structure was fully explored.

Document analysis and textual analysis in this study put neo-Marxist curriculum theory in conversation with CRT to develop a multidimensional understanding of the political economy of NLP and the ideological implications of the curriculum it produces. The results of this research add to the limited applications of CRT to MLE and the limited critiques of NLP. Empirical evidence was found to support criticisms of NLP regarding its funding and curricular content and to justify investigation of other corporate-funded MLE ventures.

Summary of Findings

Each of the four research questions are addressed in this section, with a brief account of how the research was conducted to find answers to these questions.

RQ₁: What Is the News Literacy Project's Political Economic Structure?

The first research question was answered through analyses of NLP's history, economics and finances, politics, and cultural products. Analysis of each of these areas produced a comprehensive picture of the organization. NLP was founded by a professional journalist who thought students needed specific educational instruction on how to engage with the news. Since its founding in 2006, NLP has moved from offering localized, in-person classroom and after school instruction with staff and volunteer journalists, to a subscription-based online curriculum, to a free virtual classroom and national network. NLP has positioned its staff as news and information experts, garnered national recognition and awards, and increased its public presence and dominance in this realm.

NLP is a nonpartisan, nonprofit educational organization, and its goals include increasing the use of its products and measuring their impact, building a community of news literacy educators and advocates, increasing public news literacy, and ensuring the financial structures and stability to meet the first three goals. By relying on financial and in-kind support from

foundations, grants, corporate funders, and individual donors and generating income through

domestic and international consulting services, NLP has built a multimillion-dollar budget in its

decade of existence.

The political analysis of NLP revealed the relationships and flows of power in this

organization. NLP's informational materials emphasize news literacy as a tool of critical

thinking that is necessary for democracy, claiming to value instruction of *how* to think, not *what*

to think. NLP also values including corporate media partners in leading this news literacy

education organization, as is evident by the members of its board of directors and national

leadership council, which include many more journalists and media industry members than

educators. The executive leadership team represents more diverse expertise, with former

journalists, educators, and nonprofit experts. The general staff at NLP have roles in education,

finance, media, marketing, and administration. NLP also contracts News Literacy Ambassadors

across the country and relies heavily on volunteers, such as professional journalists who speak to

classes. Other media industry connections are evident in its list of partners, which includes over

30 news and media organizations ranging in size and reach from local to global. For many

partners, NLP provides an opportunity for corporate media to participate in corporate social

responsibility efforts. The political analysis showed strong connections between NLP and

government, including partnerships with Los Angeles and New York City public school districts

and ongoing efforts to partner with public schools in seven other states.

The analysis of the cultural products produced by NLP revealed the organization's

breadth of offerings. Their products include curriculum (i.e., Checkology®), educator networks,

e-newsletters, mobile content, global resources, and professional development. Throughout these

products and their marketing materials, themes of news literacy as a modern solution to a modern problem and the necessity of facts are communicated through a tone of fear.

RQ2: How and in What Ways Does News Literacy Project's News Literacy Curriculum Challenge and Reinforce Neoliberal Capitalism?

To answer this question, a critical curriculum analysis of NLP's Checkology® curriculum was conducted. A neo-Marxist framework was used to examine the form and content of Checkology® 101, the default curriculum for middle and high school students. Two key aspects of the curriculum's form reinforce neoliberal capitalist ideologies. The Checkology® curriculum is structured so that the lessons can be added in any order to a course that a teacher creates for their students; that is, the lessons are not dependent on each other and are self-contained, atomized, and individualized. The lesson content and skills do not spiral and are not ordered in any way that links concepts from one lesson to build on other lessons. The lessons also lack discursive elements; students are asked to complete writing assessments, but the opportunity for discussion-based learning is absent in the default curricular structure due, in part, to the online form of the course. By creating an online virtual classroom with lessons that can be personalized by a teacher for their class and completed independently by students, NLP has also built a curricular form that reflects neoliberal capitalism's "highly individualistic conception of human society" (Kotz, 2015, p. 11) and embraces the virtualization of education (McCarthy et al., 2009).

In terms of content, NLP's curriculum teaches the norms and values that correspond to capitalism's goals and prepares students to join the exploitable workforce a capitalist economy requires (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 2004; Ross & Gibson, 2006) by providing little to no analysis or critique of the current news industry or larger social system, taking a generally

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agnostic approach to advertising, and failing to include economic issues in its treatment of news literacy. The curriculum content also prepares students for their roles as the consumers and workers necessary to support and replicate the neoliberal capitalism system (Apple, 2004, 2006; Giroux, 2004). This was evident in the use of language that positions students as consumers of news and other products and aligns news literacy skills with workforce skills. Legitimation of corporate news through corporate news media is evident in examples of corporate news reporters and journalists as lesson hosts. NLP's approach to news literacy does not challenge or question the news industry, as indicated by NLP's support from and partnerships with corporate news companies.

RQ₃: How and in What Ways Does News Literacy Project's news literacy curriculum Challenge and Reinforce Racism?

Through a CRT framework, the findings of this study indicate that NLP's news literacy curriculum may implicitly reinforce ideologies of racism in various ways, which largely appear to be inadvertent and a result of liberal ideals and good intentions. Liberalism and good intentions do not mean that racial ideologies are not perpetuated, and the analysis showed how racist ideologies can be subtly reconstructed in education.

Stereotypes and symbolic annihilation are ubiquitous in media content (see Behnken & Smithers, 2015; Gerbner & Gross, 1976). NLP includes many faces of Black and Brown people in their video-based lessons to ensure representation; however, those representations reinforce stereotypical themes through images or clips in which racialized group members are the subject or focal point. For Black representation, the themes are predominantly athletes, civil rights, and violence. Asian representation is limited to violence and threat, particularly surrounding the Chinese government and the COVID-19 pandemic. Latino representation reflects poverty, and

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Native American representation is functionally nonexistent. This analysis showed that quantity of representation does not ensure quality of representation.

Another finding of this study was the prevalence of decontextualized information and storytelling. A CRT framework rejects universalism, which erases the unique sociopolitical circumstances of a given story, in favor of contextualization to reintegrate the time, place, and conditions under which a story occurred. The pursuit of objectivity and neutrality in journalism can exacerbate decontextualization (Alemán, 2017). NLP's video lessons lack context in two ways: in decontextualized images and simplified stories. The decontextualized images in the Checkology® 101 lessons are images that were used to illustrate course concepts, such as propaganda, misinformation, and biases. However, the lessons fail to include context or explanations of *what* is happening in the images and recordings presented, including violent images, inflammatory pictures, extremist partisan political images and audio recordings, and white supremacist imagery. Simplified stories reduce context and nuance to provide generally correct but incomplete accounts, as in revisionist histories and assumptions about what "we" or "most people" think and do. These simplified stories result in the construction of a universal human experience that reinforces a white perspective as the "default" perspective.

Although neo-Marxist theory and CRT can be viewed as incompatible (Leonardo, 2013), the research questions in this case study of news literacy revealed the overlap in these frameworks: a rejection of liberalism and the master narratives that maintain economic and racial systems of oppression. These frameworks allowed for critical interrogation of the system of professional standards on which NLP's version of news literacy is built.

Journalism is built on professional standards meant to professionalize and legitimize the industry as a trustworthy authority for the public (Kaplan, 2006; Robinson & Culver, 2019;

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Schiller, 1979). These professional standards of objectivity, neutrality, meritocracy, and unbiased truth are built into NLP's Checkology® 101 lessons. By using the industry standards, particularly neutrality, and the industry itself as the model of the "right" or acceptable form of news, the Checkology® 101 lessons implicitly and explicitly reinforce the same liberal ideologies that are used to uphold oppression through racism and capitalism. That is, in operating within the standards of the news industry, NLP's version of news literacy, as found in the Checkology® 101 lessons, produces a news literacy that exists in service to professional news, not to democracy.

RQ4: In What Ways Does Corporate Support (Both Financial and Non-financial) Affect Nonprofit News Literacy Education produced by the News Literacy Project?

This research question was used to examine the relationship between NLP's reliance on external funding, as a nonprofit organization, and the news literacy curriculum it produces. Because interviews with NLP staff members were not available as a data source, other sources were used to answer this question. News industry experts are deeply connected to and involved with NLP. Through the board of directors, national leadership circle, expert hosts in the video lessons, professional journalist volunteers for Classroom Connection, and partnerships in news literacy community outreach such as National News Literacy Week, members of the industry have access to and possible influence on the agenda for what news literacy does and does not do through NLP.

The extent of corporate and high-level donor insider influence on the development of the Checkology® curriculum could not be determined. However, the amount of corporate and industry support—through financial contributions, in-kind donations, volunteerism, and partnerships—is evident from the news industry and broader corporate entities (e.g., Google).

This corporate support indicates that the type of news literacy NLP is producing is amenable to the industry and current power structures at large.

NLP's dependence on funding from foundations, corporations, and private donors circumvents democratic processes for funding education by replacing community-level decision making in building and implementing curriculum as part of the neoliberal dismantling of public education (Jones, 2012; Lipman, 2011; Love, 2019). Thus, corporate industry news standards— not community-based or critical standards—become the standards used to evaluate news and information, even if those standards ultimately support forms of power that oppress students and their communities.

Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research

The limitations of this research affect what conclusions can be drawn but also highlight opportunities for future research. One limitation is the artificiality of isolating systems of oppression. Two systems of oppression, racism and neoliberal capitalism, were addressed in the present study, but oppression is intersectional. Therefore, isolating these constructs failed to account for all other intersecting systems of oppression, such as sexism, genderism, and ableism, and an analysis of all the ways that NLP and its curriculum may implicitly and explicitly reinforce systems of oppression and challenge healthy and full democratic participation was not possible. Because every form of cultural, political, socioeconomic, and institutional oppression cannot be covered in one study, many opportunities remain for future research to analyze other systems of oppression to create a more complete understanding of NLP and its Checkology® curriculum and thus contribute to the larger discussion about MLE.

Although NLP is based in the United States and it has a U.S. perspective on news and information that predominates in its organization and curriculum, NLP also does international

work, and its programs are available for use or development outside of the United States. This study of NLP and its Checkology® curriculum was conducted through a U.S. lens. Future research can engage a global analysis to examine how NLP's resources are used outside the United States, with the understanding that global news literacy is not NLP's mission, but it is a service they provide. The implications of the use of a Western-produced news literacy curriculum being used in non-Western societies could be explored through decolonial theories or other perspectives from the Global South.

Another limitation of this research is that it did not include the voices of NLP staff, specifically the curriculum writers. Golding and Murdock (1979) stated the importance of investigating media production to fully understand the relationship between ruling ideas and the media that are produced. Higdon and Butler (2021) stated that understanding the "why" behind decision making in news literacy curriculum is important to ask. The present study was limited due to circumstantial and environmental issues. (It was completed during a pandemic, after all.) However, some serious concerns about the curriculum were exposed, making a strong case for asking curriculum producers why they make the choices they did. Interviews with NLP staff and other media literacy curriculum producers should be a priority. Understanding the "why" of media literacy curriculum production may illuminate or challenge the findings of the present study, creating a more complete, nuanced picture.

Although this study included a review of some of the curricular materials available through Checkology® 101, the default course curated by NLP, other materials in the Checkology® program were not evaluated. This pragmatic decision resulted in excluding some lessons and supplemental activities that may address social issues, such as climate change and immigration, and may have provided insights into racist and neoliberal capitalist ideologies.

However, using the default courses built by NLP for this analysis reflected the baseline material that students and teachers encounter when they utilize Checkology® with a "plug-and-play" approach. Future research could include more or all of the Checkology® curricular materials.

The Checkology® curricular materials were evaluated as texts, and the implementation of the curriculum was not addressed. Thus, questions about how the ideologies embedded in the curriculum function in the classroom could not be answered here. Future research could analyze how NLP's Checkology® courses are implemented through professional development, classroom instruction, and online networks (i.e., NewsLit Nation) and NLP staff and volunteers (e.g., News Literacy Ambassadors).

Recommendations

Recommendations for NLP and MLE in general based on the findings of this study include eliminating corporate funding, reducing or eliminating the dependency on the corporate news industry in order to question professional standards and introduce other ways of thinking about the quality of news and information, and making additions to news literacy curriculum.

The elimination of corporate funding is important because this source of funding may impact media literacy curriculum even if corporate funders are not directly writing the curriculum. Reliance on corporate donors and funders for big money gifts necessitates a palatable curriculum with a veneer of apoliticality that ultimately (and likely unintentionally) replicates systems of oppression. Although full rejection of corporate funding may seem unrealistic or even impossible, a priority should be to provide a permanently and publicly available historical record of funding and how that funding was used. More detailed accounts of partners who have a stake in creating and organizing affiliated events are especially important. If the goal of an MLE organization and of media literacy is to benefit democracy, these

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organizations should increase transparency of who supports them financially or with in-kind gifts, how those donations are used, and the influence these contributors have on the media literacy products produced.

MLE organizations should reduce their dependency on the corporate news industry and question the industry's standards. In practice, local and community journalism should be incorporated into MLE curriculum as valid and meaningful types of journalism, with special attention to journalism from non-white communities. This means recognizing the influence and roles of non-corporate, non-industry sources of news and information and applying news literacy skills to those outlets. For example, discussions of the use of social media should be included in the curriculum to reflect young people's news, and developing news spaces, such as Twitch.tv, should also be included in these discussions.

News literacy education also should include an examination of the problems of professional journalism, including the industry's standards, ideals, and economic structure. It needs to challenge the institution to help students think in different and critical (but not cynical) ways about journalism. These skills will allow students to reflect on and demand more from the news industry as citizens, not only as consumers. Members of the news industry have reflected on and critiqued the industry from the inside. Wesley Lowery (2020), one of NLP's lesson hosts, wrote an op-ed for *The New York Times* about the need to shift industry standards to address racism. Recommendations included listening to Black reporters and shifting away from objectivity and neutrality standards toward fairness and accuracy through context and facts. News literacy education should also address alternatives to traditional objectivity and neutrality, such as the weight-of-evidence approach (Shipley Hiles & Hinnant, 2014), pragmatic objectivity

(Ward, 2010), active objectivity (Robinson & Culver, 2019), and peace journalism (Galtung, 2003).

The final recommendation is for some general additions to news literacy curricula, such as a historical dimension of news in the United States that addresses how news has grown and changed over time and context for the information and images that are used to tell stories or illustrate concepts in news literacy lessons. News literacy curricula should also intentionally and explicitly address issues of race, including the history of "the colored presses" in the United States, racial representation, the effects of racial demographic imbalances in the news industry, and alternate ways of knowing. News literacy curricula should also purposefully and clearly incorporate economic and financial issues, such as ownership, conglomeration, the advertising-based funding model of journalism, and monetization on social media.

Conclusion

The findings of this study add important information to the literature on media and news literacy education. One key finding is the impact of the hegemony of corporate journalism. Because of NLP's reliance on liberalism (i.e., objectivity and neutrality) and corporate news, neoliberal capitalist and racist ideologies are replicated and implicitly communicated through NLP's organizational structure and the Checkology® curriculum form and content. Reliance on the tenets of corporate journalism reproduces neoliberal capitalist and racist ideologies in education. However, education can be a site for counterhegemonic learning through critical thinking and fostering organic intellectuals (Giroux, 2011; Gramsci, 1971). That is, education need not be inherently or permanently bound to the role of domination; it can be transformative and liberatory. NLP—despite being a nonpartisan, nonprofit educational organization—relies on the news industry to inform its approach to news literacy and thus becomes part of that

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ideological machine; as long as the system perpetuates systemic oppression, NLP with its current approach risks doing the same.

This research contributes to one of the enduring questions in media literacy scholarship: Can corporations support MLE, or does corporate support fundamentally compromise MLE efforts (Hobbs, 1998)? This case study of NLP and its Checkology® news literacy curriculum demonstrates the hegemony of corporate journalism and the complication it brings for creating MLE. In NLP, industry insiders (people who were journalists or had close ties to media industries) are among those leading the organization that developed Checkology®. For media companies to partner with NLP, something in NLP's mission, values, curriculum, or other resources must be beneficial—or at least not challenging—to corporate media. The longstanding relationships NLP has cultivated with corporate news and media entities suggest that supporting a type of MLE that reinforces instead of challenging industry standards is a benefit for corporate media that is worth the investment. In its contribution to this "great debate" about the role of corporations in media literacy, this research indicates that the question can be answered only if the goals of MLE are clear. If the goal is a more democratic society, this study shows that no, corporate money cannot support MLE. As this case study revealed, a news literacy curriculum that is funded in part by corporations and informed by the news industry may reinforce the systems—racism and neoliberal capitalism—that oppress and limit full democratic participation.

What does it mean if the tools that are supposed to support a healthy, informed democracy (i.e., MLE) reinforce structures of oppression? This analysis of NLP's Checkology® curriculum suggests that MLE informed by corporate media structures and standards implicitly reinforces systems of power that produce racial and economic oppression and limit full democratic participation. Is it necessary then to reconsider media literacy as an educational

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project? The findings in this study do not support abandoning MLE altogether but strongly support the critiques of McDougall (2017) and Druick (2016). Both critiques recognized the racist and capitalist implications of media literacy in its current form and reflected on and advocated for alternative approaches. These approaches include shifting away from media literacy with a utilitarian and protectionist orientation and using a critical media studies approach that addresses systems and structures of power. These critiques also signal support for the need for this critical media studies approach to embrace politics and praxis in order for it to benefit democracy. To work toward deconstruct systems of oppression, the first step media literacy must take is to detangle itself from corporate support.

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