Designing equitable media literacy interventions for critical youth agency

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Abstract
In recent years, young people engaged in political discourse and civic action online. U.S.-based social movements centered on equity issues, such as Black Lives Matter, Dreamers, and March for Our Lives, engaged young people in shaping and publicizing the goals of these movements through digital platforms. Increasingly in communities at the margins, young Americans need digital and media literacy skills to supplement contentious education restrictions within the United States, as with many state bills curtailing the teaching of LGBTQIA+ histories and critical

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race theory. With these considerations in mind, our team conducted a national study of impactful media literacy in the United States. The study included an extensive literature review, interviews with key stakeholders, and a national survey of educators within the United States. Aimed at understanding the practices in formal and informal learning spaces, the research process inspired the creation of a field guide focused on offering resources for equity-focused media literacy practices that can support educators where professional structures could not, a core finding from our study on impactful media literacy. This paper shares the process for creating the Field Guide for Equitable Media Literacy Practices, developed and published as a form of public-facing scholarship to encourage all media literacy practitioners to undergo a transformative learning process. The field guide offers a series of approaches to equitable media literacy practices centered on equity and inclusion. While the research is U.S.-based, we believe the practices suggested within the field guide apply globally, especially as we see an increase in youth movements that impact beyond geographic and cultural boundaries.

**Keywords**
critical pedagogy, equity, joyful militancy, media literacy, social justice

**Introduction**

In recent years, young people engaged in political discourse and civic action online. U.S.-based social movements centered on equity issues, such as Black Lives Matter (Hathaway, 2021), Dreamers (Nicholls, 2015), and March for Our Lives (Jones, 2018), engaged young people in shaping and publicizing the goals of these movements through digital platforms. Increasingly in communities at the margins, young Americans need digital and media literacy skills to supplement contentious education restrictions within the United States with many states curtailing the teaching of LGBTQIA+ histories (Jones and Franklin, 2022) and critical race theory (Greene, 2022).

Educators lack clear processes to support impactful media literacy practices that center equity and justice in their work. And increasingly, it has become difficult for educators to use the language of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in their learning spaces (Najarro, 2022). Media literacy programs in the United States face the challenge of balancing equitable practices against scarce resources and fears of an increasingly invasive parental oversight of course materials (DiMarco, 2022). In 2023, the Republican party introduced a “Parent’s Bill of Rights” in the U.S. House of Representatives, aiming to grant parents more control over K-12 education (Looker, 2023). While media literacy is not specifically called out in this or other ongoing state legislative agendas, it touches on many ongoing battlefronts in civic and humanities education. State legislators have also introduced bills to ban words, phrases, and concepts connected to DEI work in public education and publicly-funded initiatives (Berger et al., 2023). But all is not lost. This anti-education and anti-DEI legislation springs forth at a time when young people are the most connected to a wide variety of tools to explore the world beyond their classrooms and organize protests. Indeed, Gen Z is considered the most tech-savvy of any generation (Marks, 2021). They actively participate in global movements like Fridays For Future (2020). As of 2024, Gen Z will represent the next generation of voters in the U.S. presidential election (Moore, 2023). Media literacy has, formally and informally, played a central role in Gen Z’s education. This reality also indicates the vital importance of incorporating media literacy practices designed to cultivate “enabling media environments” (Boyte, 2015), where media literacies can empower learners to come together across differences to critique and create media for inclusive and just futures collectively.
With these considerations in mind, our team conducted a national study of media literacy in the United States. The study included an extensive literature review, interviews with key stakeholders, and a survey of educators within the United States. Aimed at understanding the practices in formal and informal learning spaces, the research process inspired the creation of a field guide focused on offering resources for equity-focused media literacy practices that can support educators where professional structures could not, a core finding from our study on impactful media literacy. This paper shares the process for creating the Field Guide for Equitable Media Literacy Practices, developed and published as a form of public-facing scholarship to encourage all media literacy practitioners to undergo a transformative learning process.

The field guide offers a series of approaches to equitable media literacy practices centered on equity and inclusion. The guide is not a curriculum or a set of resources, of which there are many available for educators. Instead, the goal was to create a series of thought exercises for anyone to use for self-evaluation and guidance on key concepts valuable to media literacy education. While the research is U.S.-based, we believe the practices suggested within the field guide apply globally, especially as we see an increase in youth movements that extend beyond geographic and cultural boundaries.

The field guide is divided into five sections used to navigate the exercises with ease but not to dictate the order in which practitioners engage with the material. The goal is to generate a series of provocations that could be done independently or as guided. The sections of the guide are: (1) where do I stand, (2) who cares, (3) imagining more inclusive futures, (4) with communities, and (5) where do we stand. Each of the sections and their rationale are detailed in this paper by pulling out the main concepts of standpoint, care, and imagination that run throughout each section of the guide. These three concepts are at the heart of the thought exercises and emerged as the most prominent concerns for educators and practitioners faced with finding new avenues for centering equity and inclusion in their media literacy practice.

The first section of the field guide concentrates on the concept of standpoint, specifically asking participants and educators to consider their positionality toward the media they use. Media has become a ubiquitous part of how young people interact with news and social causes. Understanding their standpoint in addition to the standpoints of other media creators is a great way to open up the conversations that need to be had for equitable media literacy practices. In many different learning environments, the subject of the lesson can determine how educators and participants are located in relation to the media used.

**Standpoint: Locating participants in media literacy practice**

To begin the field guide, we ask individuals to consider their position concerning the media topics they are learning. The answers to these questions are more complex than most students or educators originally estimated. Other educational spaces have utilized standpoint to open conversations about historical inequities associated with access to scientific learning and achievement (Burgess and Patterson Williams, 2022).

Beyond the classroom, the practice of standpoint can aid students in understanding the media technology around them as having relationships to existing social-cultural power dynamics. As Dadas (2016) points out in her piece about utilizing Queer methodology to study social media, media are sexed, gendered, and raced in ways both the creators and users do not always see. Dadas (2016) built her argument around civic activism on Facebook surrounding marriage equality in LGBTQIA+ spaces. While activists have found new ways to use social media to organize and inform citizens, there are still hidden ways in which the media can lean on existing systems of social understanding.
For example, several years ago, controversy surrounded the mobile game *Pokemon Go* as individuals began to realize the map the game was built on contained a form of digital Redlining, or the practice of denying Black Americans access to loans and resources needed to change neighborhoods (Akhtar, 2016). Following the hashtag #mypokehood, The Urban Institute found an average of 55 PokeStops in majority-white neighborhoods and 19 in majority-Black neighborhoods. Because PokeStops are where players could access free benefits for playing the game, the lack of stops in predominantly Black neighborhoods meant that players who lived and worked in those areas were required to pay for items that were free in other neighborhoods. This controversy demonstrates how positionality within media technologies can change conversations around media use. *USA Today* reported that Niantic, the company that made *Pokemon Go*, relied on previous maps used in a game called *Ingress* that was popular among a young, white, and male demographic (Akhtar, 2016). As a result, the map they used to develop *Pokemon Go* was founded on a classed, raced, and sexed experience of media technology. The positionality of a mobile game does not rise to the level of civic engagement; however, the same lessons are being rehashed over TikTok in recent years.

In 2021, TikTok claimed that an algorithm error led to the suppression of Black creators’ content; however, many alleged that the suppression of Black creators was by design (Murray, 2021). Activists who posted Black Lives Matter content faced the most issues, such as videos being taken down, muted, or hidden from their followers (McCluskey, 2020). Gen Z uses TikTok, for example, as a search engine to learn about the world over other popular sites like Google or Bing (Huang, 2022). TikTok has also become instrumental in how Gen Z organizes around social movements, such as Black Lives Matter and Climate Change (Ward, 2022). Asking young people to consider the positionality of creators, programmers, and even company leadership in their media technology allows them to see the larger picture of how media incorporate power structures. However, locating students, educators, and the media technology they will discuss or use in the classroom is the first step to determining what we call *standpoint*.

Standpoint is a concept Rolin (2009) developed to explain power relations. Standpoint theory or epistemology is the idea that social identity is relevant to education (Toole, 2020). The theory has many applications; for example, feminist standpoint epistemology integrates intersectional feminist approaches into research and instructional practice (Cohen et al., 2022). Standpoint theory can help media literacy practices approach how a student’s social location influences how they see the world and their objective reality (Allen, 1996). These notions of power, dominant cultural groups, and insider/outsider status are wrapped into this. Standpoint asks us to evaluate the physical, mental, and social spaces that construct our worldview and the worldview of others. As with the TikTok and *Pokemon Go* examples, media technology is not without its standpoints informed by user demographics, business practices, and programmer goals.

The first and final steps of the *Field Guide for Equitable Media Literacy Practices* evaluate standpoint by bringing an individual’s positionality full circle after completing all the exercises in the guide. In the final section, we ask educators and students to consider where we all stand together in the face of the daunting network of power structures within media and politics. Considering standpoint is at the core of many social justice movements today, especially those that have asked governments and educators to reconsider who and what is highlighted in history.

Our conversations with educators and practitioners indicated struggles for finding entry points for having conversations that included equity and diversity, particularly for those working in public education where many legislative agendas in the United States are focused on removing voices and experiences from the curriculum. It is important to note for an international audience the timing of the interviews and survey during the 2020 global pandemic in addition to the January 6 attacks on the United States Capital following the presidential election. At this point in time, the standpoint of
educators, parents, children, and legislators was front of mind, particularly for those looking to make connections to traditionally underrepresented or misrepresented communities in their practice. Framing this theme as *standpoint*, enabled the field guide to approach the topic in a way that allowed for practitioners and educators to ask themselves and students probing questions that still center equity and inclusion. It became increasingly important to practitioners and educators as debates about what should and should not be included in classrooms and public spaces became a leading concern in schools and universities.

In the United States in 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement prompted several conversations about everything from Critical Race Theory in the classroom to the presence of confederate monuments on or near campuses (Grovier, 2020). Media coverage of these conversations varied widely, leaving many individuals to seek out news and information on the topics from an overwhelming, disjointed set of partisan sources. While Tucker Carlson Fox News declared “mobs” were “tearing down American monuments,” other outlets, like the Associated Press, focused on the local political debates (Carlson, 2020; Santana and Drew, 2021). The standpoint of the viewers and the media outlets requires a deeper understanding of how media and cultural discourse interact across time and space. These conversations are not easily fitted directly to media skills, such as video editing, but require opening up space for participants to reflect on the issues covered by the media, the media itself, and their positionality as the audience.

**Standpoint in time, space, and cultural discourse for classrooms & the guide**

In *Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice*, Joyce and Gillespie (2015) argue objects, such as public monuments, undergo a series of shifting itineraries, or active and inactive meanings, over time. Tied directly to conversations about heritage as a medium for social discourse, object itineraries provide a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals engage with social-cultural symbols and ideas at different times and places. While this seems like a heady concept out of the grasp of youth civic engagement and media literacy, the most recent examples of viral videos of vandalized statues demonstrate the need to locate young people in a time, space, and cultural discourse that fuels civic engagement. The media create meaning, adding to the multiple itineraries a specific symbol or rhetoric undergoes (Clarke, 2018). Including lessons that connect participants to media history, such as how news media covered similar issues 10, 20, or 50 years ago, can help young people to see a larger cultural discourse.

In 2020, after the murder of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter protests grew across the U.S. and spread globally. In the wake of these protests, over 160 Confederate monuments were removed (Vigdor and Victor, 2021). Protestors focused on toppling reminders of white supremacy within the United States and colonialism globally (Araujo, 2020). It is important to note that the parent’s rights bills and anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) legislation mentioned in the introduction directly reacted to these global movements. Popular topics beyond the confederate monuments included Christopher Columbus and Winston Churchill. Toppling statues made for dramatic media events and tangible changes to the physical-social landscape of many communities.

Viral videos of individuals throwing paint onto monuments, setting them on fire, or dumping them into the sea surfaced globally. According to the BBC, the statues targeted individuals “whose reputations (and fortunes) were built on the crushing of peoples of color and the stifling of indigenous cultures” (Grovier, 2020). The monuments become easy but highly valuable targets for protest. They serve as a lightning rod for discourse about power. Black Lives Matter protests demanded a complete re-evaluation of the kind of cultural education that takes place in spaces that venerate conquerors and tyrants.
Sweeping demands made to decolonize public spaces and education curriculums resulted in state legislators pushing back against humanities education, including Critical Race Theory and gender and sexuality studies in the United States. Consider the value of standpoint for young people that struggle to see themselves within history, especially if that history has selectively excluded their experiences and worldviews for generations. Those conversations then expand from focusing on physical spaces to mediated ones. How are young people engaging with their world? Civic engagement with public monuments and physical locations is happening in digital spaces. Years before the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, the Unite the Right movement utilized memes and social media to develop arguments to protect Confederate monuments in Charlottesville, Virginia (Lafrenz Samuels and Foster Bhusari, 2023). The Unite the Right movement included many of the same viral strategies that social justice movements used but turned those practices into a means of spreading disinformation and discourse within digital communities. In some cases, memes would draw on similar, if not the same, visuals to make meta-meme commentary about Confederate monuments. In their analysis of Unite the Right Charlottesville memes, Lafrenz Samuels and Foster Bhusari (2023) found the rhetoric of the memes did not focus on the Civil War but instead, heritage rhetoric tied to the Colonial Framers of the U.S. Constitution as a way of legitimizing the positionality of the movement. The language of progressive social activism was also appropriated to organize digital campaigns against Black Lives Matter and the campaigns to change public spaces to reflect the breadth, diversity, and history of the Southern United States.

The case of Unite the Right demonstrates that simply teaching media skills is not enough to fight against undemocratic forces that seek to undermine social justice movements. The same media skills and strategies can be deployed to spread disinformation and factual reporting. Asking young people to consider media messages’ standpoint to themselves and others allows for dialogue about how civic engagement works in the democratic process while still including equity within the conversation.

Connected to standpoint is what young people care about and care for in their activism. In the case of monuments and statues denoting “great white man” history, we see young people expressing a deep desire to see public spaces reflect equitable social values and, more importantly, themselves and their current realities. Locating standpoint is just one piece of the puzzle; asking young people to reflect on care and its many applications is the next area developed in the equitable media literacies field guide.

As researchers, we did not leave ourselves out of the reflection on standpoint when developing the guide. Before entering the map the field guide includes several sections related to terminology used, how to use the guide, who the guide was designed for, and the standpoint of the researchers to media literacy. It is important to ground the guide within an on-going research practice so that readers can understand the guide as part of a public-facing work. It is vital to acknowledge the connections the researchers have to the topic of equity in media literacy while including more information on how media literacy has long engaged with debates related to cultural discourse in the media. The earlier sections also provide a space to demonstrate the amount of care that went into building the guide, serving as a way to document our process for transparency and clarity.

The second and fourth sections of the field guide focus on concepts of care, which are important for developing action from the insights of standpoint. In our study it was immediately clear how much the practitioners cared about their work, but it was also readily apparent how low they evaluated others, such as investors or administrators, in understanding the value of including concepts like care in curriculums. Concerns ranged from how to get students to care about issues of equity in the media, in addition to how to teach students to translate their care into action.
Care: Connecting concepts to action

We care about many things, and young people are particularly passionate about their world. A core part of civic engagement is getting individuals to care about and for the world around them. However, passions can also create social divides and conflict. Take the monument example; caring about how history is represented has created conflicting social discourse around how controversial figures like Winston Churchill are represented in public spaces, classrooms, and the media.

Media helps to reinforce the ways individuals express care. Social media is creating a marketplace out of caring—encouraging individuals to like, subscribe, follow, retweet, or hashtag their care within a market of emotional reactions. Individuals sometimes break algorithms by imbuing nuanced understandings of care through social media interactions. Facebook famously added multiple emoji fractions after it became clear the “like” button was not enough to convey the depths of emotions it was being used for in posts (Stinson, 2016). Platforms like Patreon, Twitch, and Go-Fund-Me are built on digital donations as a form of care—be it for a struggling artist, creator, or personal health crisis.

Fisher and Tronto (1990) define care as an activity that includes ways society maintains, continues, and repairs the world. They distinguish five types of caring: caring about, caring for, caring with, caregiving, and care receiving. For the purposes of the field guide, we focus on “caring for, caring about, and caring with.” These three distinctions are important to developing an equitable media literacy that encourages youth civic engagement. According to Fisher and Tronto (1990), caring for is relational, caring about is transactional, but caring with is more communal. These caring actions are easy to find within social media interaction; however, caring with is the most conducive to building democratic practices because it focuses on making authentic connections between individuals and communities.

Care is a central construct in the field guide because young people engage with messages of caring at a near-constant rate. Still, the value and quality of those messages are sometimes lost in the translation between acknowledgment and action. Decades of debates around the merits of slacktivism or using social media to perform activist tasks such as liking a cause, for example, have yielded evidence that online engagement affects young people’s civic life offline. However, the strength and sustainability of the effect lack conclusive clarity. A study of Facebook memes shared among youth in Pakistan found that online engagement did translate to offline engagement with politics but that the memes themselves did little more than inform or entertain (Nazeer and Ashfaq, 2023). Organizations like UNICEF and its “Likes Don’t Save Lives” campaign have condemned social media activism to amount to little more than value-driven posturing, a way to publicly commit to a cause with little risk and low impact (Khazan, 2013). Still, tremendous global action is taken through the Fridays For Future movement, especially among young people. Friberg (2022) wrote the Fridays For Future movement utilized economic and social disruptions to draw attention to not only climate change and open up dialog for imagining utopian futures.

It is right to question what kinds of care are reflected in digital activism and, more to the point, what actions of care should be taken when advocating for equity. In media literacy education, practitioners should reflect on how media represent issues young people care about and how young people use media to care about and for issues close to them. In this, we ask educators and students alike to pause and consider the differences in caring about and caring for something through media activism.

Caring about issues signals support for causes. This kind of digital activism is what campaigns like “Likes Don’t Save Lives” are directly criticizing. Young people show their care about something through retweets, shares, and upvotes (Halupka, 2022). Posting a popular climate change meme is a social media bumper sticker or yard sign to advertise what a person cares about. Still, this action does not necessarily translate directly to civic action (Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023; Eranti and Lonkila, 2015). It is certainly a level of engagement, demonstrating knowledge of social and
political issues and a desire to inform others about their position. But it differs greatly from the actions taken when young people care for someone or something.

Caring for issues and individuals requires the construction of meaningful relationships. The time and energy required to care for something is elevated from caring about it. This is important to media literacy’s connection between the messages activists produce and their organization’s results. Using media to organize a protest or gather signatures on a petition translates from caring about an issue, like gun legislation, to caring for the victims. Getting young people to see the important step forward “caring for” can mean in their social activism is part of the civic engagement process. But we do not stop there in our guidance.

Building on these concepts, we propose “caring with” communities, especially on equity issues. Students can move to care with “democratic commitments to justice, equity, and freedom for all” (Fisher and Tronto, 1990). Caring with others requires both a signal or “care about” and an act or “care for” an issue. Caring with brings students and educators back to the question of standpoint. We have already seen this in practice during the large-scale global Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and 2021. Many communities took action to care with a marginalized community to push for social justice reforms. Young people were at the helm of this process and continued demonstrating the skill of caring with communities and causes rather than simply about them. It is possible that evidence for how digital activism can, and sometimes does, translate into offline action embedded with the notion of caring with communities.

Imagination: Playful imagination is key

In their book, The Playful Citizen, Glas et al. (2019) argued that modern culture, and indeed citizenship itself, has undergone a “ludification,” or increasingly relying on deception and mockery. The ludification of politics has become more central in “legitimate” civic engagement spaces. Nowhere is that more apparent than in media. From cable news to memes, mockery and deception have become central to political discourse. Young people are bombarded by media messages that encourage cynicism, anger, and surface-level, superficial comprehension of others.

Drawing from The Playful Citizen (2019), Vijay and Gekker (2021) argued that “affective, playful ways of political engagement become legitimized, unseating the centrality of rationality in the Habermasian public sphere” (p. 117). They also point out that the design of many social media platforms exercises soft power in shaping and constraining the creativity of individuals engaging in online political discourse. While it is true that the media environment aids in shaping political discourse, as previously discussed, young people are using slacktivism and hacktivism to imagine new avenues for civic participation. Playful imagination is central to advancing media literacy to bolster democratic participation.

In his work on civic imagination, Jenkins et al. (2020) argue, “the capacity to imagine alternatives to current cultural, social, political or economic conditions: one cannot change the world without imagining what a better world might look like” (p. 5). For years, Jenkins et al. (2020) have explored how imagination can combat increasing levels of distrust in the United States. Over the last several decades, public trust in institutions of democracy has decreased significantly in the United States. Jenkins et al. (2020) examine how civic imagination can be used to envision forms of engagement in daily life amidst political norms that are further removed from the realities of many people.

Imagination is not simply a form of escapism; rather, it offers creativity and compassion to connect with others not entrenched in normative politics. Using fan fiction, creative storytelling, and popular culture, Jenkins et al. (2020) have explored how citizens can tap into imagination and use play to engage. Imagination is a powerful tool because it compels individuals to think differently. It takes us beyond our current constraints in our communities, politics, society, and the world.
Civic imagination and play are evident in how young people engage with politics through media (Jenkins et al., 2020). Memes, for example, are an excellent source of inspiration that allows individuals to play together in an imagined space. Many social movements driven by young people, such as Fridays For Future and March for Our Lives, have used memes as a legitimate form of political expression.

Memes encourage individuals to use humor and popular culture to develop short-form expressions of identity (Foster, 2014; Shifman, 2014). For example, the popular LGBTQIA+ meme, *No Cops at Pride, Just . . .*, includes a participatory call to action for individuals to imagine Pride celebrations without police. These memes often include imaginative solutions that draw from popular culture, personal fantasy, and play with others in the same digital spaces. Individuals can imagine a future of LGBTQIA+ communities without violence or discrimination by engaging with the meme's open-ended messaging. In other words, when combined with standpoint and care, imagination becomes a powerful tool to develop equitable media literacy through imagining more inclusive futures.

Imagination allows individuals to project ideal futures and more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable norms when compared to their typical surroundings. It can also circumvent the boundaries derived from present struggles. It is the key to moving media literacy from creating cynical citizens to citizens prepared to draw upon their creativity to engage in social movements. And, as previously highlighted, many young people are already drawing upon imagination and play to shape their political engagement.

Equitable media literacy practices that encourage youth civic engagement cannot thrive by pushing against current systems that contribute to social inequities; instead, these practices need to use imagination to envision and enact the types of media environments that will allow us to strive for such futures. As critical education scholar Freire (2009) once wrote that imagination helped curiosity and inventiveness to enhance creativity.

Fostering more inclusive imagined civic futures enables young people to draw from the previous lessons of standpoint and care to take creative action. While we still need to focus on the realities of the present, including the systems and platforms that support inequity, we can push young people to consider the many possibilities of the future. And, of course, in many ways, they already engage in this kind of imaginative play through the media. But with every positive exploration of using play to engage with political messaging, there are also bad examples. From Gamergate to the alt-right movement, young people also engage in imaginative play that can produce anti-democratic messages and radicalize individuals against their communities. In many ways Gamergate and the alt-right movements in the United States are connected, starting first questioning diversity, equity, and inclusion in video games, and then extending to an open attack on social justice movements in general. In that regard, educators need to include critical thinking about digital content beyond advertising and algorithms to include the cultural messages contained within memes and other “playful” content that is not taken as seriously within media literacy spaces. As educators, we can also use standpoint, care, and imagination to meet young people where they are and create lessons that will have immediate real-world applications outside the classroom as students explore civic engagement through media.

**Adding care, standpoint & imagination by creating media environments with communities**

Civic engagement through media does sometimes risk putting a distance between individuals and the communities they wish to understand and serve. Journalists have long debated the merits of community-based reporting and how they can better “care with” the communities they cover.
The greatest challenge is that communities today do not depend on physical spaces to connect. Digital spaces can make for valuable validation and friendship for many individuals, especially those at the margins, such as LGBTQIA+ youth.

The final steps in the field guide build toward critical agency by encouraging educators and young people to take meaningful action with communities rather than for them. Much has been written on allyship and its usefulness in education and social justice movements (Douthirt-Cohen et al., 2022; Kutlaca and Radke, 2022; Mullen, 2022). In considering how to build equitable and inclusive futures through media literacy practices, we focused on developing a deeper understanding of the communities an educator or practitioner serves. This is especially helpful for educators and practitioners who find themselves in positions of privilege compared to their student populations. Learning about communities through an empathetic approach allows practitioners to encourage young people to think critically about why a community has or has not taken action.

This learning process draws from decades of work in critical media literacy spaces that emphasize understanding representation in media and media systems (Mihailidis et al., 2021). As with the *Pokemon Go* example, media systems can be built upon biased algorithms. However, it is also important to acknowledge the centuries of biased media representations of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Social stereotypes are created and perpetuated through many types of media, from entertainment and informational to digital and analog (Hall, 1997). Critically evaluating the impact these messages have on communities is vital to understanding the mediated experiences of individuals.

The final step in the guide draws everything back to the idea of *standpoint* by asking the simple question of “where do we stand” from the micro-individual level to the macro-social level. The guide encourages educators and practitioners to push young people to imagine inclusive futures and critically examine who is missing from their vision and why. Again, this idea is founded on understanding how media works to connect and divide communities. Pushing young people to critically evaluate where they stand in their relationship with one another, their media use, and the community is vital to building actionable community engagement goals. This exercise can release students from the constraints of current systems to envision a new world.

In the 24-hour news cycle, individuals are frequently elevated through media as the single catalysts for change. Greta Thunberg, for example, is one young person that became the voice for a global movement (Tait, 2019). And while individual narratives and achievements matter, the collective power of communities is most important for media literacy practices. In his work on civic agency and engagement, Boyte (2008, 2015) wrote that civic education needs to reinvigorate young people to feel agency over democratic discourse and practices. Boyte wrote about the many constraints that bind young people to take action, including standardized programs and bureaucracy. Indeed, social media includes many guardrails, bells, and whistles to encourage individuals to use applications as they are intended and elevate specific kinds of content. The sameness of everything can choke out the life of the budding curiosities that young people have about the world.

The term South African author Mangcu (2012) uses is “technocratic creep,” defined as the erosion of agency through modern social structures. Modernity has given individuals more convenient ways to delegate agency over many aspects of their lives. Convenient technology has created more invisible labor in the form of individuals working in grocery delivery, ride-sharing, and physically maintaining the infrastructure that supports digital connectivity. In 2022, *USA Today* reported on “digital amnesia,” or how digital technologies have replaced the need to memorize simple things like directions or phone numbers (Collins, 2022). According to their reporting, one in three Americans doesn’t have their emergency contact numbers memorized. Technocratic creep has enabled individuals to give up their agency to be able to phone a friend for help.
In this environment, it is vital to introduce young people to new ways to consider their agency in modern society. The field guide finishes by suggesting individuals draw upon the lessons of care, standpoint, and imagination to develop critical agency skills. Those skills, and not media skills alone, are most valuable to equitable media literacy practices and will help support democratic processes. Addressing issues of personal agency in a world of digital amnesia provides a new direction for media literacy education that emphasizes how young people can do more than simply use media. They can use it to organize social movements that have lasting impacts on political policy, rhetoric, and history.

**Conclusion: Connecting equitable media literacy to critical youth agency**

In addressing how to build more equitable media literacy practices, we consider the value of locating students within a space, culture, and political structure. We address how care and imagination can enable young people to engage with media messages to develop more inclusive futures. Young people are already engaging with these concepts, from social movements such as *Black Lives Matter* (Hathaway, 2021) and *Fridays For Future* (2020). Many of these movements rely on social media engagement as a form of civic participation. However, there are downsides to engaging with digital social media movements, as seen with radicalizing individuals through conspiracy theories and disinformation (Marwick et al., 2022; Schulze et al., 2022; Scully, 2021). Young people need a range of media literacies to assist them with critically engaging with civic and political discourse.

Media literacy programs in the United States, in particular, face challenges in balancing equitable practices against scarce resources and fears of an increasingly powerful parent oversight of course materials (DiMarco, 2022). So-called “Parent’s Rights” bills reduce the resources for education programs focusing on social justice. But while the information may be pulled from school library shelves, young people are well adapted to finding it online, but with a risk of encountering disinformation, misinformation, and political discourses that further muddy their understanding of social justice movements. Media literacy educators must understand how young people use media to engage in civic life and provide guidance on evaluating sources of information and crafting messages for themselves.

In the wake of education strife within the United States, our national study found that many educators lack support for impactful media literacy practices centered on equity and justice. Our research, currently under review, suggests that educators are struggling to articulate the value of equity and inclusion in their work by trying to strike a balance between changing legal terminology and cultural sensitivities. But not all hope is lost. Many educators and students are still invested in bringing these topics to the classroom and beyond. Using our data, we constructed a field guide to support anyone looking to center equity within their media literacy practice. Within this framework, we first ask children and adults to consider their standpoints and the standpoint of others before proceeding with understanding media messages.

Standpoint encompasses a variety of concepts, including time, space, culture, politics, and economics. By carefully untangling, or rather appreciating, the complex web of the personal and collective identity of young people, educators can assist them with developing a deeper empathy for others. The concept of care comes in that practice, particularly caring for and with communities. We ask educators and students to examine how we use media to show care and develop support systems. But it is also important to distinguish between caring for someone or something and caring *with* them. Finally, we asked that educators consider imagination and how young people often use play as a form of civic engagement. Imagination allows individuals to reverse engineer, so to speak, a world they would like to live in. This is done first with an emphasis on imagining what just and equitable systems would look like and then thinking backward toward how to achieve that
vision creatively. In truth, political discourse has increasingly relied on concepts of play to engage with the media. The strongest evidence of this is using digital media and memes to build and fuel social justice movements.

The guide is positioned to support the development of critical youth agency, which we understand as developing self- and collective efficacy to support the capacity to act in daily life (Boyte, 2015). In this sense, this guide is positioned to allow educators to conceive of and design formal and informal learning experiences that are infused with intentional practices that help envision young people as actors who understand their social location, who develop meaningful ways to care for others and issues, and who can imagine what alternative media and civic futures look like. The final two components of the guide—with communities and where we stand—ask learners to apply these approaches to their proximal environments.

While the guide is not prescriptive or normative, it offers an entry point for educators interested in infusing their learning experiences with inclusion-first media literacy practices. The development of this guide, based on a large research project, prioritizes approaches and mindsets to enable media literacy practices that are conceived not with the purpose of skill transfer alone and not with assumptions about how these skills transfer to more engaged societies. Rather, this guide offers a set of constructs that collectively shift the purpose of media literacy from that of the more skilled media consumer and creator to the more mindful community member that can connect mediated experiences to their social location and who can use this knowledge to strive for more connected, inclusive and equitable conditions for all.

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