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The Enemy of Digital Literacy is Digital Marketing

Erika Hurth

Southern Oregon University

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Cover Page Footnote

Revisions to "The Threat of Targeted Advertising to Digital Literacy" : 1. Changes to the title: "Digital marketing" is more appropriate for the purpose of this article. I will leave it up to editors which is preferred: "The Enemy of Digital Literacy is Digital Marketing" or "Concerning the Effect of Digital Marketing on Adolescent Literacy." Open to other suggestions. Reviewer #2 made the valid point that this article does not "really investigate what targeted ads are doing to students and how teachers can help students adjust to the ads," but rather, my own experience grappling with digital content and my concerns for the next generation of ELA students. 2. Introduction: As per Reviewer #1's suggestion, I changed "2012 was the year that Facebook introduced targeted advertising to its Newsfeed platform" to the more accurate statement: "2012 was the year that Facebook launched a variety of new revenue-generating products." I then go on to explain why this is still worth concern, adding "And while this might not seem like an apocalyptic, world-ending move, I do believe this changed the game of digital literacy forever. This was the year that targeted advertising took off." 3. Body: Most suggestions from Reviewer #1 & #2 were followed. For example, I eliminated the quotation marks around "helpful links," added more "in my opinion" disclaimers, and eliminated some redundancies. Reviewer #1 made a helpful suggestion about clarifying my statement regarding ELA teachers "ushering" in digital literacy and I took the suggested phrase instead. I also eliminated and changed some statements in the paragraph that used to begin with: "Literacy is the outcome of ever-changing social mechanisms." I decided to eliminate this definition, and instead, write: "Given that literacy is so dependent on social norms, it would obviously be a disservice to students to require only in-text readings. If the norm is to communicate online then students deserve to learn how to read, write, and think using this medium." I also chose to eliminate my statement about literacy is "rapid change" and, instead, I segue back into how it is rapidly changing due to digital marketing. I also eliminated "Facebook's 2012 Newsfeed re-shaped everything about the way people publish content online and even the way that Kindle and Amazon started making digital readers..." per Reviewer #1's request. I did decide to keep the anecdote about my students and their smartphones because I think it elaborates on the addictive features of these platforms, as well as the "www.rabbit-hole" of research comment. 4. Question for the editors: Does the student's name featured in the photograph need to be fully blocked out, or is the first name/last initial OK?

The Enemy of Digital Literacy is Digital Marketing

ERIKA HURTH

Southern Oregon University

I graduated high school in 2012, the year that the world was supposed to end. But good news: I made it to 2020 and I am on my way to becoming an English Language Arts teacher. I am still convinced, however, that something happened in 2012—something big and transformational—just as conspiracy theorists predicted. That is, something about the way we read and process content online.

2012 was the year that Facebook launched a variety of new revenue-generating products. And while this might not seem like an apocalyptic, world-ending move, I do believe this changed the game of digital literacy forever. This was the year that targeted advertising took off. Facebook introduced sponsored stories, promoted posts, premium ads, gifts, and offers to their users' newsfeeds. Now, almost a decade later, it seems that everything that we read and do online is infiltrated with these same money-grubbing tactics.

I want to consider the effect that these tactics have on student reading comprehension. As a graduate student of teacher-preparation program in Oregon, I'm seeing a trending support for digital literacy because our classrooms are occupied by so-called "digital natives." These students are the first generation to grow up entirely surrounded by technology like smartphones, tablets, and e-readers. They have never existed in a world without digital content. In addition to traditional literacy, now students are expected to possess digital literacy, a skill that is often delegated to ELA classrooms. New teachers are being implored to increase students' ability to use digital technologies (i.e., computerized

devices) to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information.

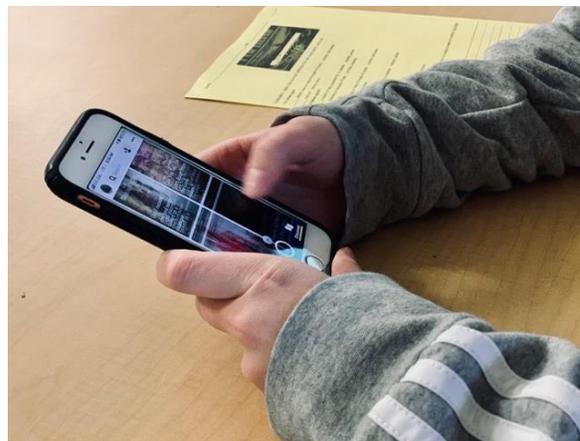


Photo: Student scrolling Snapchat before class

I am a digital native, born in 1994, and I can't help but feel like the dialogue around digital literacy is missing something. It's missing the perspective of a student like myself who watched her education become increasingly dependent upon computers and devices.

Every year I progressed through school, more and more assignments were to be completed online. By the time I was in high school, almost every teacher had their own website, their own set of articles to read, forms to download, and blogs to write. Personally, I never found this content as comprehensible as simple hand-outs and textbooks. I groaned and grumbled every time a teacher assigned an article to read online, and I continued to do this through college. That's because I find reading on screens really difficult—and even more so now, in a digital world that's littered with advertisements.

My preference for physical text might come as a surprise to those who expect “digital natives” to favor computerized reading. I found my penchant for tangible books validated in an online article (yes, how ironic) that was assigned by one of my professors. This article, found on *Business Insider*, is titled “A New Study Shows That Students Learn Way More Effectively From Print Textbooks Than Screens” (2017). This piece led me down a www.rabbit-hole of research, and in so doing, gave me pause to think about how being a child of the internet age has shaped my own digital literacy skills. With about thirty web browser tabs open, I skimmed several bits of research until I was able to form some semblance of my own take-away thesis.

The authors of one article, Patricia Singer and Lauren Alexander, reference a particularly formative work on the nature of reading comprehension titled “Toward a Theory of New Literacies Emerging from the Internet and Other Information and Communication Technologies” (Leu et al., 2004). This article begins by making a crucial point: *Literacy is change*. And I would add, *change is difficult*.

Given that literacy is so dependent on social norms, it would obviously be a disservice to students to require only in-text readings. If the norm is to communicate online then students deserve to learn how to read, write, and think using this medium. We have to remember, too, that our job as public-school teachers is to perpetuate democracy. We are charged with developing citizens who are literate, and in their literacy, might educate themselves on the national affairs in which they are expected to participate (Leu et al., 2004). The internet is how most students get their news, so of course we must teach them to navigate it. What is so daunting about this task, however, is how rapidly this medium is changing.

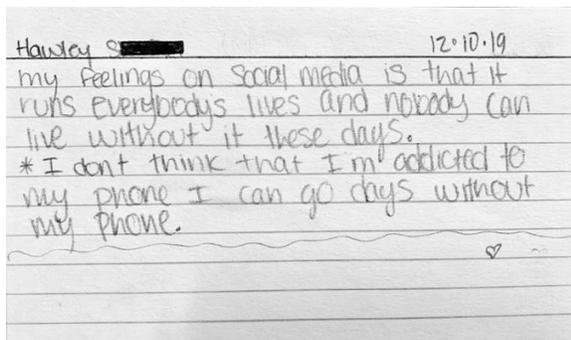
The recent bleeding of targeted advertising into everything we read and do online has, in my opinion, negatively impacted students’ ability to comprehend textual information. What makes these new platforms worth concern is their “scroll” feature. The “pull-to-refresh” and “infinite scrolling mechanism” that pervades through all digital content has been designed by corporations like Facebook to mirror slot machines—they try keep us hooked for as long as possible, sending targeted advertisements along the way (*The Guardian*, 2018). Even the article from which I investigated this idea uses this mechanism; it’s impossible to read more than ten lines without getting hit with an “Ad.”

This feature of digital content, above all else, is what I fear most for adolescent students. There is something fundamentally disturbing about targeted advertising (even more disturbing than the fear that profitable companies are collecting our personal data). I am primarily concerned with the fundamentals of how we read content when it is interspersed with flashy, loud advertisements and the effect that this could have on young, impressionable students.

Digital marketing is seamlessly intertwined, now, with content. These manipulative features not only distract students from delving deep into content, but they keep students addicted to their devices.

This “nomophobia” (no-mobile-phone-phobia), as it is referred to by some, has become such a major issue in my student-teaching placement that I felt called to share these concerns with my high schoolers. I cannot go a single day, or more honestly, a single class period, without telling students to put their phones away. I gave them a presentation that touched on the behind-the-scenes of social media platforms and the 13-billion-dollar industry that feeds off of the addictive “scroll” mechanism. The students

took interest in the lesson but mostly remained in denial about their addictions to their devices. They rebelled, as teens do, against the notion that their generation has a problem.



Student: "My feelings on social media is that it ruins everybody's lives and nobody can live without it these days. I don't think that I'm addicted to my phone I can go days without my phone"

As someone who lived through the dawn of social media and digital literacy, I still maintain that giving students text—real text, in-print—is a *gift*. For any ELA teachers reading, let me say this: we need to give our students a break. Most students spend their time after and before school scrolling, and scrolling, and scrolling. Giving them the chance to hold a solid book or a printed piece of paper is what they need to stay focused and out of late capitalism's greedy grip. Modern students are increasingly becoming victims of a targeted, psychologically manipulative system created

by software developers to keep them hooked and using their platforms. We need to be wary of these forces and encourage our students to do the same.

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