The Communication Revolution

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Three Case Studies on the Role of Media
But first...

• A little food for thought
2009—Iranian Election Protests
Iran

- Long history of “new media” activism—for example, 1979 revolution and the cassette tape
- Twitter arguably played a significant role in the 2009 election protests—organizing demonstrations (domestic and global), getting the word out in a way that circumvented state controls
- There is some debate about the role Iranian tweets played
2010-2011—the “Arab Spring”
Basic Timeline

- Revolt in Tunisia begins with self immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, 12/19/10
- Riots begin in Algeria on 1/7/11
- 1/17/11 first self immolation in Egypt, mass protests begin on the 25th
- On the 16th mass protests begin in Libya
- Political instability subsequently spreads to almost all the countries in the region, including Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Syria
Sidi Bouazid, Tunisia - The people of Sidi Bouzid overcame heavy censorship and police repression to ensure that their uprising did not go unnoticed in silence.

Protesters took to the streets with "a rock in one hand, a cell phone in the other," according to Rochdi Horchani - a relative of Mohamed Bouazizi - who helped break through the media blackout.

Since the same day of the self-immolation of the 26-year-old street vendor that triggered riots causing the Tunisian leadership to flee the country, family members and friends used social media to share the news of what was happening in Sidi Bouzid with international media....The key difference in Sidi Bouzid was that locals fought to get news of what was happening out, and succeeded.

"We could protest for two years here, but without videos no one would take any notice of us," Horchani said.

On December 17, he and Ali Bouazizi, a cousin of Mohamed Bouazizi, posted a video of a peaceful protest led by the young man's mother outside the municipality building.

That evening, the video was aired on Al Jazeera's Mubasher channel.

http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/01/2011126121815985483.html
New Social Media was one of the Keys:

• In Egypt, facebook was a critical rallying point and information clearinghouse—for example, the 400,000 “fans” of the “we are all Khalid Siad” page.

• Mobile video, subsequently picked up by international media outlets helped galvanize international calls for action in Libya
2011-???

#OWS
How did it start?

• It all began with a tweet from the magazine Adbusters that said: “What is our one demand? #OCCUPY WALL STREET”

• The tweet linked to this image, which refers to Egypt’s Tahrir square

#OCCUPYWAL STREET

Are you ready for a Tahrir moment?
On Sept 17, flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street.
I am the 99% - occupy wall st. org

THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST OF MY GENERATION ARE BAGGING YOUR GROCERIES.
I AM THE 99%

My dad died 4 months ago, making me part of the 1% at 18 years old. He always felt the wealthy had a duty and a privilege to help people who need it. So do I.

I am the 1%. TAX ME

I have a 140 IQ.
I am bi-lingual
I have a Master's Degree.
I pay out of pocket for crap health insurance.
I temp just to EAT.
I've been under/unemployed since last X-MAS.
I'm moving in w/ my retired parents if I can't find better work. At 26.

I am the 99%.
The Questions are:

• What can we, as educators, do to help our students engage and evaluate these events?
• What tools do we need to give them to understand national and international events in this media environment?
What is Media Literacy?

- Rooted in the work of two media theorists—McLuhan and Culkin
- McLuhan is famous for the idea that “the medium is the message”
- Culkin coined the idea that new technologies required new forms of literacy
A classical model of the communication situation looks like this:

Sender ➔ Message ➔ Receiver

McLuhan argued that this model was incomplete because the medium, or the way that the message was conveyed was often as important as the message itself.
Culkin extended McLuhan’s ideas by arguing that new media required new kinds of literacy.

Students need to develop literacy skills in writing and speech, including basic comprehension, composition, and so on.

Writing and speech require literacy because they are both media that convey contents.

Why, asked Culkin, do we not also require basic literacy training in new media, the most dominant media in most of our students’ lives?
The Dangers of Media Illiteracy

• Students get locked out of the knowledge economy.

• It is an element in the new core standards (evaluating evidence and argument, etc.)

• Irresponsible use of social and other forms of media has bad consequences.
What are the Dangers of Media Illiteracy in a Globalized World?

• A tendency to accept oversimplifications—students need to be aware of the obvious motives for media sources to simplify given time and attention constraints

• An uncritical acceptance of an ethnocentric worldview—a lack of media literacy makes it difficult to control for the biases of domestic news sources
Two Problems

• A theoretical problem—how to get students to think critically about *representations*

• An institutional problem—how to help students understand the constraints of mass media news as a representation of real events
The Problem of Representations

• By “representation” I mean a word, concept or image that purports to give us a picture of a real thing or event

What are the problems?

• They are not equivalent with reality
• They are always partial, and so the reveal some things about the story or event while concealing others
Examples

• Yasir Arafat’s famous quote that “One person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter” (compare the Taliban pre 1989 with the Taliban post 9/11)
The Problem of Media Institutions

What are the underlying issues

• Most media sources are for profit institutions and therefore they have an incentive to spin stories to suit the tastes of their clientele

• There are constraints in terms of time, expertise, and relevance that guide what gets reported and how it is reported

• Most importantly: Framing
Framing

• In order to make news relevant and easy to understand, media institutions need to provide stories with a “frame” that organizes and arranges the facts
• The frame is necessary to turn a collection of facts into a story
• Media frames require two “gatekeeping” functions: 1) some stories are in and others are not 2) some facts are relevant to telling the story and others are not
Gatekeeping 1

• At the level of what stories are in and what stories are out, media framing creates significant distortions

• For example, one common frame is national interest—but this frame works against a broader more inclusive worldview

• A specific case: coverage of Africa (AIDS, Rwanda 90-94’) vs. coverage of instability in Europe
"The international media initially affected events by their absence. A tree was falling in the forest and no one was there to hear it. Only those of us in Rwanda, it seemed, could hear the sound, because the international media were not there in any appreciable numbers at the outset."

Roman Dallaire, Commander of the UN Mission to Rwanda
But gatekeeping also organizes what facts get reported when a story makes it to the air. For instance, to make a story relevant to a viewing audience, news organizations like to stick to a fairly routine narrative structure that implies an easily understandable outcome. Example: Heroes and Villains—stories are more compelling if there is an easily identifiable hero and an easily identifiable villain. (specific case: sunnis and shi’ites sunnis were the heroes in the 70s and 80s, but the villains in Iraq)
Other Institutional Problems

• The collapse of independent sources in major news outlets—the centralization of reporting (for example, the AP)
• Source credibility/source bias—an increasing problem with the proliferation of blogs and other web driven news sources
• The social media effect: mainstream sources are either overly deferential or ignore social media altogether
Eight Principles for Teaching Media Literacy (from the Ontario Ministry of Education)

1. All media messages are constructions. The media do not simply reflect external reality. Rather, they present carefully crafted constructions that reflect many decisions and are the result of many determining factors.
2. The media construct versions of reality.

The media are responsible for the majority of the observations and experiences from which we build up our personal understandings of the world and how it works. Much of our view of reality is based on media messages that have been preconstructed, and have attitudes, interpretations, and conclusions already built in.

(A report is never just a report)
3. Audiences negotiate meaning in media messages.

If the media provide us with much of the material upon which we build our picture of reality, each of us finds or 'negotiates' meaning according to individual factors.

(The question is not just is this news accurate, but what does the way that the story is put together “do” for the viewer?)
4. Media messages contain commercial implications. Media literacy aims to encourage awareness of how the media are influenced by commercial considerations, and how they impinge on content, technique, and distribution. (Incentive toward the “late breaking crisis” or “gotcha”)
5. Media messages contain ideological and value messages.

6. Media messages contain social and political implications.

The media have great influence in politics, and in forming social change. Television can greatly influence the election of a national leader on the basis of image.

(Fair and Balanced is also political)
7. Form and content are closely related in media messages

• As Marshal McLuhan noted, each medium has its own grammar and codifies reality in its own particular ways. Different media will report the same event, but create different impressions and messages. (Newspaper vs. tv)
Examples of Practical Exercises

• Ask any of these questions of a media artifact
• Change the medium—twitter or facebook vs. a news story
• Aggregate tweets: track a tweet that has been re-tweeted. What can you tell about the original source? Who is picking it up? Why do you think they are? What are they connecting it with?
• Compare and contrast a domestic and an international source
• Narrative analysis—recap the story as if it were a story
• Image/Content analysis—write your own story about the images first
More Ambitious Changes

• Integrate media literacy alongside traditional literacy training.
• Debate—great for media literacy and more.
• What else?
• How can we help?