Digital media and forced migration

CRITICAL MEDIA EDUCATION FOR AND ABOUT REFUGEES

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This article explains how digital media can be used in critical ways to promote engagement with content about the refugee crisis among young people. Furthermore, the role of digital media in the lives of refugee children is explored.

"The media *intervene*: they provide us with selective versions of the world, rather than direct access to it."

David Buckingham (2003, p. 3)

CRITICAL DIGITAL MEDIA ANALYSIS AND FORCED MIGRATION

Recent UNHCR (2015) figures indicate that 21.3 million people were identified as refugees in 2015 and that these numbers are the highest in the world since World War II.[1] The vast majority of these individuals, 86 %, seek refuge within low-resource or "developing" countries neighboring areas of conflict. In 2015, there was an influx of over 1 million refugees traveling hazardous routes to get to Europe from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, among other countries. 25 % of these refugees were children (ibid.). The current role of media as a tool for teaching and learning among young people – children, adolescents, and young adults – who are refugees, as well as about the current refugee crisis for non-refugee young people, is both critical and complicated.

In a digital media landscape, the dissemination and reproduction of content related to the refugee crisis ranges from news articles to video footage, to posts on social media and digital games. Each of these and other forms of information and communication are widely available through internet-enabled mobile phones, tablets, and computers, as well as through more conventional forms of media like film, television, and radio. Each medium can influence how digital media users understand and interact with people experiencing forced migration as well as how media users understand the larger political context of this global problem. Critical media analysis of the refugee context matters because representations and information in the public domain inform public knowledge about refugees and can impact how refugee persons are treated, particularly in host communities; these narratives can also impact how refugee persons perceive themselves as valued (or undervalued) insiders/outsiders throughout their forced migration.

Refugees, representation, and the public domain

Depictions of the humanitarian crisis and the role of humanitarian aid in digital media are common. As a global issue, it is important to maintain a focus on the larger power structures related to the representation of humanitarian aid and refugees, to the politics of forced migration, and to related host country policies and practices. This requires a critical examination about how and which communities are portrayed in the media, how information about the region-specific refugee issues is presented, and what types of information and representation are available to refugee communities directly. In short, this is a question of media education. Media education is focused on teaching and learning about media, not only using media for teaching and learning; it involves young people in both "critical understanding *and* active participation" in media consumption, production, and analysis (Buckingham, 2003).

A critical approach to digital media centers attention on power structures that are embedded in the discourse about and depictions of refugees in the popular domain. While there are very many ways in which humanitarian aid is essential to supporting refugees, the way in which both philanthropic initiatives and the communities they aim to serve are represented in digital media can be limited (and limiting). Representations about the politics of international development and humanitarian aid in news media and through online campaigns have been criticized for contributing towards creating a "spectacle" or "spectacularization" of complex political issues (Kapoor, 2013). This is typically defined by depictions of refugees from a deficit framework, as the depraved and impoverished Other, while Western countries, INGOs, and host countries are represented as the defenders of human rights. This visual, narrative, and discursive picture of the refugee experience maintains and reproduces underlying power dynamics between "us" (powerful, civil, developed, Western) and "them" (desperate, uncivilized, developing, non-Western) (cf. Bhabha, 1983/1999; Hall, 1992).

This divide is also evident in the personal narratives of struggle and

redemption about individuals who flee conflict and in stories of their solace found in countries across Europe and North America in particular. Less well represented are the arduous realities of day to day life in refugee camps, life as an urban refugee, or of those many forced migrants who are refused entry, asylum, settlement, or support from refugee-receiving countries. Less well represented still are the rich histories, knowledge, and experiences of artistry, education, family, and professional life that refugee persons carry with them throughout their migration.

The power of media representation and digital distribution of narratives of hardship and loss play a dual role: they inform the more privileged global public about a portion of what is happening (arguably only the most spectacular parts) while maintaining a clear line of division between those who are refugees and those who are not. In this way, digital media has a mixed impact on society, supporting, perhaps perpetuating, and potentially harming public understanding about these situations. Challenging these limited portrayals and including more robust representations of, about, and for refugees demands a critical approach to media education. This type of focus matters both in terms of using digital media for education among young people who are refugees and for using digital media for education about the refugee crisis to inform all (young and older) people.

In the following sections, examples of how digital media can be used in critical ways to promote engagement with content that can support visibility, understanding, and empathy about the refugee crisis among young people will be offered. The role of digital media in the lives of refugee children directly will be explored, with a focus on storytelling. Throughout, the importance of critical media education guided by educators and adults who can further the existing digital media available about refugees and for refugees will be emphasized.

LEARNING FROM DIGITAL MEDIA ABOUT CONFLICT AND CRISIS

Efforts to harness digital media to educate and engage young people who are not refugees about serious social and political topics have emerged alongside digital tools becoming more prolific and accessible. One such example is through "serious" digital games available online and attempting to represent particular aspects of being a refugee or living in conflict or crisis. Many digital games have existed over the years including *Darfur is Dying* (MTV, 2009, Ill. 1), *Ayiti: The Cost of Life* (UNICEF, 2006), *Food Force* (UN World Food Programme, 2005), *Immigration Nation* (iCivics, 2014), *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013), and *Against All Odds* (UNHCR, 2005, Ill. 2).[2] These types of games invite the player to engage with serious social and political topics and attempt to either emulate discrete components of what it is like to live under the duress of conflict and crisis or to engage players in empathy-driven narratives related to immigration and forced migration.

There are clear critiques that can be made about the depth and quality of these types of serious games ranging from game design to game mechanics and to the substantive representation of the topics presented (Dahya, 2009, 2012). Alone, serious games sometimes provide only partial and potentially superficial interaction with deeply troubling topics and experiences (ibid.). However, they can also serve as interactive, low-risk, narrative forms of learning and play designed to engage with difficult content (Dahya, 2012). Their value can be greatly enhanced by educator or adult support and participation in discussing what occurs in the games. In other words, media education practices can support meaningful and in-depth engagements with serious topics. These practices include asking young people to research the subject represented (or absent), to question the extent to which this type of medium can reflect the severity of these realities, or to ideate alternate constructions of the games, among other media education strategies.

Other forms of popular digital media include digital videos focused on the individual narratives of refugees and often refugee children and adolescents. The UNHCR Teaching Resources[3] available online, for example, link to various multimedia tools that can be used to teach about refugee circumstances and conditions. These include a link to a five-part BBC animated series called *Seeking Refuge*[4] giving a unique insight into the lives of young people who have sought refuge in the UK, told by the children themselves (BBC, 2017, Ill. 3). Similarly, the British Red Cross produced a digital comic book story called *Over Under Sideways Down*[5] (Ill. 4) which shares the harrowing tale of Ebrahim, a Kurdish Iranian forced to flee to the United Kingdom as a teenager. The animated medium is engaging for children in particular and offers an opportunity to empathize with the individual experience of another child facing forced migration. Short animations may be used as a starting point for critical conversations about refugee persons and refugee life. Similarly, short live-action videos can be used to humanize the highly political experience of refugeehood and diversify how a young person understands and perceives the image of who is a refugee, what a refugee looks like, and how a refugee contributes to host communities. Through each narrative, educators and other adults can build on information presented in videos. Such work allows for further exploration of the history of a particular region, a query into the political context of a situation, or exploration of the history of countries that host and deny refugees. Each of these helps to situate personal narratives within the broader scope of the forced migration context to ensure those narratives are understood as political artifacts.

CRITICAL DIGITAL MEDIA IN THE LIVES OF REFUGEES

In some cases, digital media is created directly for or accessed by young people who are experiencing forced migration. The messages presented through TV news or distributed using online platforms like YouTube can serve as informal forms of education. In a study of Palestinian young people living in camps in Lebanon, Fincham (2012) identified how TV productions about being Palestinian greatly informed viewers' understanding of Palestinian nationhood. Without stable social supports and the formal messages built into state schooling (albeit state schools are not impartial or representative entities), informal institutions can play a large role in the development of youth identity.

The accessibility of mobile phones in otherwise low-resource contexts is also presenting interesting social and cultural changes related to information, communication, and learning. Online social networks mediated and maintained by internet-enabled mobile phones are creating meaningful transnational supports and opportunities for young people who are also refugees. For example, young people in the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya access information about how to continue their schooling past the high school level using mobile phone applications like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, and importantly receive social support about education from their community networks living in diaspora (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2016). Social media is also used to mobilize and organize communities around education and in the face of emergency situations such as environmental disasters (cf. Dahya, 2016).

Initiatives such as *EduApp4Syria*[6] launched by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) seeks to build on the potential capacity of digital tools to enhance teaching and learning in migratory contexts. Educational games (as distinct from serious games) can be used to teach literacy and numeracy, among other possible affordances.[7] Initiatives such as these build on educational games and activities designed for mobile devices in developing settings (cf., for example, Hageboeck & Norfleet, 2015) and draw on established educational game design principles (cf., for example, Klopfer, 2011).

In any case, attention is needed with regard to the nuances of representation within these digital media platforms, ranging from gender to cultural representations of target communities to tensions and changing dynamics that exist between young people who are refugees, their families, and their home and host communities. Attending to the rapidly changing cultural conditions and political contexts of forced migration in any digital artifact may be one of the more challenging elements of designing digital tools and content "for refugees" whose lives and legal status are often in flux. Ensuring that content is culturally appropriate requires that it be vetted and tested by community members, a crucial step in the process of designing digital media for young people who are experiencing forced migration.

CONCLUSION

Storytelling combined with imagery – live action, interactive, animated, or illustrated – can be powerful means of communication for children, adolescents, and young adults learning about the global refugee crisis. At the same time, supplementary lessons and critical dialogue about the larger scope of refugee contexts and experiences is necessary to ensure that young people (regardless of refugee status) do not only see stories of success and hope, of death and destitution, nor only of Western promise and opportunity; rather, nurturing young people to make thoughtful choices about how to engage with the refugee crisis requires that they learn about the complexities of conflict. These complexities include: the role of nations globally in these political settings; a view to the rich histories of refugee home communities; the social and cultural discrimination refugees often face throughout their forced migration and resettlement; representation of the many contributions newcomers make to enrich host countries; and, the ongoing injustices pertaining to global constructed scarcity of basic resources which contributes to refugees living in camps, in urban and rural poverty, and in waiting for access to basic human rights and services.

Little if any digital media in the popular domain addresses the structural political and economic factors that influence global affairs and consequently shape the possible pathways and distinct experiences of forced migration. These oversights in representation of the refugee crisis perpetuate positions of difference (us vs. them) and maintain a distance that makes dehumanization of forced migration and refugee persons possible (see also vom Orde in this issue).

The extent to which digital media can be used to educate non-refugee young people about refugees, as well as to support teaching and learning among refugee young people, is entirely related to the quality of media education surrounding digital media artifacts. Adoption of good media education practices are crucial to education at a time when young people need to understand the origin, cultural markers, purpose, politics, omissions, and design of the digital tools and content they are using in relation to the changing realities of forced migration.

NOTES

[1] *63.5 million are considered forcibly displayed, including 21.3 million refugees, 40.8 million internally displaced persons, and 3.2 million asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2015).*

[2] *Other contemporary games can be found through* Games for Change *which aims to create games and cultivate good game-making towards having a positive social impact. Available at: http://www.gamesforchange.org/play/ [20.02.2017]*

[3] *http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/teaching-resources.html [20.02.2017]*

[4] *BBC (2017).* Seeking Refuge. *Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01k7c4q [20.02.2017]*

[5] *http://webapps.redcross.org.uk/RefugeeWeekComic/ [20.02.2017]*

[6] *https://www.norad.no/eduapp4syria [20.02.2017]*

[7] *The competition launched in 2015 and open source beta versions of the games were presented during the UNESCO Mobile Learning Week in Paris, March 20-24th, 2017.*

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