Digital Cultures, Pedagogical Challenges, and Critical Thinking: Some Questions

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Abstract
This article seeks to raise some questions regarding the professional and ideological challenges that arise from new ecosystems of digitization in higher education. Discussions on digital technology in education usually centre around its use as an enabling, neutral instrument for furthering the reach of education, ease of disseminating and accessing material, making available international and flexible academic programmes, enhancing the competencies of teachers to enable creation of digital course content. The article moves away from such understanding of technology in merely utilitarian and instrumental terms towards philosophical and ideological questions about the implication of digital technology in power and surveillance mechanisms, in the socio-economic life of a community, and in the very cultural imaginaries of people. It examines the interactions of digital technologies with popular and youth cultures, the changes that they bring into the digital classroom, and resultant issues in pedagogy and critical thinking pertinent to higher education, especially to literary studies.

Keywords: Digital culture, digital education, pedagogy, critical thinking, youth cultures

Introduction
It is difficult for us to imagine that technophobes of yore eyed with suspicion ‘advancements’ in technology such as the bicycle, or even books, which have now acquired an inevitable materiality in our existence. It is with a similar inexorable force that digital technology hit the most confirmed technophobes amongst us in academia and education
two years ago with the world reeling in the grip of the Covid pandemic. The seemingly-inevitable digitalization of educational methods and digital sourcing of academic material that followed has brought about new ecosystems that offer professional and ideological challenges, both for the teachers and the taught. While for the teachers it has meant a reinvention of delivery systems and pedagogical practices, for students, it has opened up questions regarding access to education, disembodied peer-interaction, and the very erasure of the relational basis of classroom teaching-learning.

The increased interactions with digital new media, even for entertainment and companionship during extended periods of lockdown, have brought into our classes young people who inhabit digitally mediated popular cultures that shape their sense of self and society, and indeed, the nation. How do we understand these inhabitations and align pedagogical practices, especially in literary studies, with youth cultures evolving in the context of the digitality of our era? How do we critically interrogate, rather than venerate, the logic of data and digitization? What role do literary and cultural studies have in interrupting digital consumption with critical reflexivity? Also important is the imagination of university spaces in the future, that the Indian budget of 2022 promises will be digital, and about which the EY report asks in the article, “Are Universities of the Past Still the Future?” (Friday, 2022). These are some of the conversations in which this article engages. It seeks to raise questions about the interactions of digital technologies with popular and youth cultures, the changes that they bring into the digital classroom, and resultant issues in pedagogy and critical thinking pertinent to higher education, especially to literary studies. While asking these questions, I also propose to be aware of my positionality as a teacher of literary studies in a premier university in India.

Digital Technology, Media “Narcosis”, and the Question of Agency

Euphoric narratives on the use of digital technology in education dwell on it as an enabling, neutral instrument for furthering the reach of education, ease of disseminating material, accessing a vast variety of resources for research at the click of a button, and making available international and flexible academic programmes. From administrative perspectives in universities, digitalization of education involves providing technological infrastructure for conduct of classes and library
services, administering exams, anti-plagiarism checks, and coordination between various stakeholders. Other concerns on which discussions are centred are about enhancement of the competencies of teachers, creation of open access, digital course content, and ease of the pace of learning for students. Notwithstanding the obvious and visible bounties of digital technologization of education, these narratives about technology as an apolitical medium outside the content delivered need to be examined, especially in the humanities and social sciences classrooms.¹ Philosophical and ideological questions about the implication of digital technology in power and surveillance mechanisms, in the socio-economic life of a community, and in the very cultural imaginaries of people are often erased in thus understanding technology in merely utilitarian and instrumental terms as a medium.

In his influential book *Understanding Media*, published in 1964, Herbert Marshall McLuhan importantly reminded us that “the medium is the message”, that the very scale of the medium controls and influences human associations, and self-conceptualizations of individuals and cultures. His contentions on the scale and effects of media and the dissolution of boundaries that it brings about may be useful to study our interactions with digital technology. To McLuhan, the world in the age of mass media is so structured by it that people live “most of their lives within the enclosed and mediated spaces governed by the rule of images” (McLuhan, 1964, p. xv). He understands mass media as a “narcotic” (p. 42) that has effects on the very self-perception and psyche of individuals: “we become what we behold...we shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us” (p. xi). According to him, the use of technology causes a numbing effect, a “narcosis” (p. 41) and a “hypnosis” (p. 32). This results in the coping mechanism of “autoamputation” (p. 42) in which human beings construct and behold idols and conform to them. If this pervasiveness of technology, made more insidious by its invisibility, consumes us so, and impedes critical thinking, an important question that must be raised is that of our ‘agency’ as students and teachers in negotiating it in the classroom.

Interestingly, McLuhan also suggests an antidote to the narcotic effects of technology, a “countervailing thrust” (p. 70) that has the potential to oppose the dominating structures of technology: “The artist is indispensable in the shaping and analysis and understanding of the life of forms, and structures, created by electric technology” (p. 65). It is
significant, from our location in literary studies, that this countervailing force is the critical viewpoint of the artist figure. McLuhan understands the artist figure not only as a person who professionally produces artistic and creative works but as a person of “integral awareness” (p. 65). Thus, his suggested antidote to technological and media “narcosis” lies in its interruption through critical reflexivity and a kind of ethics of oppositionality to structures imposed by it.

I suggest here that this agential faith placed in the resistive figure of the artist is an important pedagogical practice that teachers in literary studies, and indeed in Humanities, can adopt. As our digitized knowledge-landscapes become more voluminous and cluttered with vast digital resources, archives, information, images, and sounds, we need to understand that pedagogic issues involved in the pursuit of knowledge through digital technology are not simply restricted to developing competencies to handle technology as an instrument but may also be extended to interrupting information flows critically, and thus claiming transformative agency. An important pedagogic necessity in this age of global digitalization would also be to assert the specificity of digital experiences in specific regions of the world and guard against cyber-orientalism in the digital spaces.

Youth Inhabitations in Digital Media and Literary Cultures

The question of agency must also be considered in so far as the students who inhabit these new digital cultures are concerned. On the one hand, is the promise of digital technology that has been seen as empowering the student-consumer with choices. On the other hand, is the view that the new “prosumers”2 of digital technology have only illusions of greater agency in being able to construct their own reality, for the reason that digital capitalism has created new “seductive structures... that seem difficult to resist, let alone rebel against” (Ritzer, 2015, p. 15). In this argument, the market as a driving force of technology can only lead to regimentation and reproduce prevailing ideological structures of power. The question of the agency/critical abilities of young students situated within digital cultures and new “mediascapes” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 33) being an important one, this section of the article further discusses some interpretive theories that probe inhabitations within digital and mass media cultures and the question of agency and critical challenge to hegemonic ideas, which is important to our pedagogic methods.
The last decades of the 20th century heralded a revolution in media technology with the emergence of the cable television, internet, and new social media platforms. Popular and literary cultures were further reshaped with developments in digital technology in the 21st century. New forms of articulation, especially for the young, have been made possible through OTT and streaming platforms, Youtube, new media, and new literary forms such as graphic narratives and spoken word poetry. The study of these new forms of expression is reflected in the changed curricula of literary studies that now requires the pedagogical interdisciplinarity of culture studies, media studies, critical theory, visual studies, and sociology, etc. to transact.

The new digital platforms, where articulations have been made possible across social distinctions of class, caste, and cultural differentiation, have been seen as offering a liberatory and more democratic potential to emerging youth cultures. The content on these platforms clearly reflects and mediates lifestyles, career choices, and self-articulation by young people beyond traditionally accepted standards. The aspirations and voices of young people from small towns, rural, and suburban locations are increasingly visible in the OTT and streaming contents that defy stereotypes about them. Clearly, youth subcultures are both, impacting and being impacted by our contemporary mediated cultures. It is these young people, charting out their identities through simultaneously defying conventions, as well as being embedded in new digital corporate cultures, who inhabit our higher education classrooms. In this context, the observation that Parmar and Pandit ask about mediated youth cultures and the question of their agency is very pertinent to our classrooms:

It is a question whether media representations of youth on these streaming platforms evolve against the conventional patterns of youth identity and subculture, or are just a lifestyle change among young people embedded in a corporate culture that is reflected through these media programmes (Parmar and Pandit, 2021).

The possibility of resistive and oppositional youth subcultures emerging in commodity capitalism and platform capitalism, from a context where young people themselves are consumers of digital mass-media has been debated by many theorists, most famously by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1990s (Du Gay, et al., 1997). They used the analytical tool of the “circuits of culture” to probe the
interrelationship between representation, production, consumption, regulation, and identity to see how dominant as well as subversive meanings are produced and contested within complex layers of culture. Fiske (1989), on the other hand, overturns the idea of popular culture as “culture made by the people for themselves” (Williams, 1983, p. 237) and as coming spontaneously from the masses, by saying that it is multinational corporations who now create popular culture: “In capitalist societies there is no so-called authentic folk culture against which to measure the ‘inauthenticity’ of mass culture, so bemoaning the loss of the authentic is a fruitless exercise in romantic nostalgia” (27).

The Frankfurt School theoreticians, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse together produced a radical critique of “mass culture”, demonstrating the crucial significance of mass media in forming social consciousness and defining the limits of social change under late capitalism. The phrase “culture industry” was first used by Adorno and Horkheimer in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). In this book, they sought to distinguish the commonly used phrase “mass culture” from “culture industry” to clear the misapprehension that forms of popular culture and art arise spontaneously from the masses. Through the idea of the “culture industry”, Adorno proposes that the masses are not the agential subjects but the objects/consumers of well-thought-out strategies of the culture industry. He says that the term “mass culture” is erroneously interpreted as springing from the activities of the masses. The culture industry, through technical capabilities and concentration of administrative and economic power, produces cultural forms for the consumption of masses and also determines the nature of that consumption. Thus, it exercises psychological and social control over the consumers (the masses) and reinforces and perpetuates certain ideologies that suit powerful interests: “The masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery” (Adorno & Rabinbach, 1975, p. 12). The seemingly neutral descriptive term “mass media” (p. 12), which this culture industry uses to describe itself, in fact, masks this insidious control over the minds of people by the “master’s voice” (p. 12) and blunts the power of resistance. According to Adorno, such cultural commodities manufacture goodwill and produce “uncritical consensus” (p. 13). He says that some intellectuals also characterize the culture industry as ‘democratic’ as it caters to a
demand and also is a source of dissemination of information. Adorno’s response to this is that the messages and information so disseminated are “vacuous”, regressive, and “shamelessly conformist” (p. 16).

The cultural forms that technology produces may hold sway over vast numbers of people and may seem harmless but “the consensus which it propagates strengthens blind, opaque authority” (p. 17). Equipped with technology, the culture industry becomes an agent of “mass deception” and “fettering consciousness” (pp. 18-19). If autonomous, free-thinking individuals are necessary for democratic societies, the culture industry clearly impedes the formation of one, and is thus termed “anti-enlightenment” (p. 19) by Adorno. Adorno believes that the culture industry has so implicated the masses in false consciousness that any form of revolutionary praxis is difficult to imagine.

Stuart Hall (1973/2011), in a more optimistic analysis, opens up theoretical spaces for agency and transformation for subjects embedded in the field of technology. He suggests a four-stage theory of communication consisting of the processes of production, circulation, distribution/consumption, and reproduction. He describes each stage as “different moments” in “a complex structure of dominance”, each stage being “relatively autonomous” (p. 78) from the others. This means that the “encoding” of a message does control its reception or “decoding” but not entirely, each stage in the communication circuit having its own determining limits and possibilities. Hall’s model emphasizes “discourse” (p. 79) and ideological processes in the encoding and decoding of messages rather than communication being a neutral dissemination of information. Yet, media texts and the cultural power of hegemonic discourses can be challenged. This moment of contestation, for Hall, is a very important political moment that opens up transformative possibilities through the “politics of signification” (p. 87) (that is, the way in which meanings are produced and disseminated). Transformative possibilities lie in these spaces of “oppositional” (p. 87) readings and new dimensions of meaning which cannot be foreclosed by systems of power, however coercive they are.

Sociologists of material and virtual youth cultures have similarly differed in their assessments of whether young people embedded in digital consumerist cultures can be agents of radicality and social change at all. Some have argued that consumerist cultures give to the
youth languages of aspirations and stability, which they uncritically adopt, and so, one must not romanticize resistive potential of youth. Other sociologists such as Burke, France, and Barham have maintained that young people are not merely passive recipients of technology and can resist the ideological power of technology by creating liminal spaces of their own. It is to be examined in each case whether these spaces are depoliticized spaces of escape or articulations of contrarian responses to the homogenizing tendencies of digital worlds. Some of the youth articulations through digitized media in India, especially in the fields of music, performative genres, and painting have been refreshingly critical and subversive of normative identities and their representations. These expressions also open up settled ideas of canons and literary production in departments of literature.

This debate whether digital cultures can be sites of struggle, negotiation, and exchange between resistive groups and the forces of ‘incorporation’ operating through technology, needs to be kept alive in digital educational spheres of the future. Pedagogic methods should thus engage with the question of how to critically cross the path of digital spheres through ideas of mediation and representation. An intellectual agency could be claimed in the digital world when technology is critically intercepted, rather than by following the code of its consumption.

**Literary Studies and Digital Platforms**

The emergence of digitized content creation, almost as an industry parallel to print cultures, has presented new questions about the processes of creativity, consumption, curricula, and canon formation in departments of literature and English Studies. Spoken word collectives, interactive fiction spaces, and digital platforms such as Kommune, Unerase, Terribly Tiny Tales, Twine Fiction, Kavishala, Fan communities, etc. are becoming popular spaces of literary and textual production that have still not found recognition as worthy creative spaces. The new challenge in our classes is how to use and amalgamate these spaces into the domains of print culture that have traditionally been regarded as the mainstay of literature.

These spaces of digital literary production also challenge the hegemony of literatures produced in English language just as the inclusion of translated works from regional literatures of India have made the notion
of English Literature more expansive. The digital space has seen literary production in mixed codes, Hinglish, and regional languages, thus registering important changes in linguistic practices and respectability accorded to them. The digital space is witness to complex processes of “linguistic hybridization” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 133), thus proving that “languages and ideologies are ‘multi-accentual’” (Loomba, 1998, p. 28). The linguistic variety and complexity of these spaces opens new questions and challenges in teaching-learning in English Literature departments and has implications for linguistic and disciplinary jurisdictions.

Conclusion: From “Co-presence to Tele-presence”

In an interesting phenomenological assessment of digital technology in education, Aroles and Küpers (2021) describe the shift to digital classrooms as a shift from “co-presence to tele-presence”, referring to the loss of embodied interactions of students with their teachers and peers. Thus, they see technology as a “transformative mediator” of the very basis of pedagogical practices of responsive engagement. Relationships that are formed as a result of this shift are distant, non-emotive, and lacking in immediacy and depth. A challenge then would be to find ways and means to re-embbody teaching-learning transactions in universities of the future.

Another useful assessment that they make is that “technological enframing” of the world instrumentalizes it and makes teachers and students into technological extensions and objects under managerial governance, thus leading to conformity and homogenization: “When those involved in education start seeing themselves as ‘quasi-technological’ entities or as extensions of technologies, they are in danger of losing contact with their authentic, embodied and independent being, with the disintegration of a distinction between self and tool-object. The question of the body and embodiment thus becomes central.” Narratives of digital universities as accessible education for the future must thus be counterbalanced by assessment of the loss of relational learning incurred by students if they exist in only virtual higher education spaces.

Interdisciplinary pedagogic practices that understand technology not only as an instrument of modernization but also as embedded in history and power politics, and mediating our very sense of the self and the world around us, need to be brought into the ambit of discussion. The
critical edge of humanities and social sciences that is so essential to our pedagogic practices must be kept alive to disrupt uncritical digital consumption.

Notes


2. Ritzer explains that the processes of simultaneous production and consumption (thus, “prosumption”) are most visible in the digital world where people produce and consume on Facebook and social media platforms, on writing and reading blogs, and on MOOC platforms where students evaluate and grade each other’s essays.

References


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