Mediating Class: The Role of Education and Competing Technologies in Social Mobilization

Populist movements around the world have exposed gaps in perspective between the educated elite and less-educated masses (ordinary people). They have also revealed a relative lack of attention among the former toward the latter. That is, they have reflected how educated global elites' dream of an "end of nations"[1] has not been more broadly shared. Instead, conservative nationalist rhetoric, such as to "make American great again," has gained wide appeal across Asia, Europe, and North American. This discourse appears regressive, yet it represents at the same time widespread desires and frustration related to largely unrealized liberal promises of social mobility. Some may say the rise of parochial, sectarian populism has indicated a failure of civic education, particularly in postindustrial western societies like the United States.[2] On the other hand, it might be said to demonstrate the increasing power of some alternative forms of education, and a lack of appreciation and understanding of them among scholars and educators.

This paper hopes to shed light on how ordinary people learn in ways and through means that are at odds with the ideals and experiences of scholars and elites. To do so it explores from a philosophical perspective the intersections of education, technology, and social mobility, to highlight how people learn social class, and learned in classed ways outside of schools. To start with education and technology, most articles tend to examine how technology educates in schools. In relation to enhancing social mobility, technology in schools is generally seen as a good thing. Education tends to reproduce social structures. Educational technology provides more to a greater number of students beyond the brick-and-

mortar schoolhouse. Of course, these technologies exist, and come from, outside of schools. Computer labs are on the way out, and increasingly passé with the use of mobile computing. In this vein, many have written about the Internet's democratizing potential impact on knowledge production and dissemination.

At the same time, those with optimistic views of technology must contend with digital divide issues. Historically the digital divide has been seen to impede progress toward equal education worldwide, notwithstanding varied continued projects to provide devices to youth and online data access around the world. However, there is today another digital divide, as access to Internet information is increasingly specialized and differentiated across demographics. Thus, in this paper I examine how Internet education mutes social mobility and reproduces class, as online media is facilitated by and oriented toward political-economic elite and corporate interests. In contrast to the dream of Internet equality and information liberty, this article considers how online media is increasingly marked by market conglomeration and private control of information, often retracing and broadening gaps between different social and cultural classes. In place of education for social mobility, there is social mobilization by online learning, of classes with different interests, aims, and practices. This mobilization is for private ends more often than it is for public ends today, given corporate control over most major online information sources.

The first part of this article provides a theoretical understanding of the relationship between technology and education. The second part discusses foundational linkages of class and popular media production and consumption. The third part integrates these topics by exploring how online learning through segmented social media operates to reproduce class and facilitate and mobilize various groups to engage in active sectarianism in the public, political sphere. This paper therefore highlights a challenge to those who are hopeful for education to resolve sectarianism, given the increased influence and reliance upon

educational and online technology for social learning around the world today. It concludes

with a recommendation for more focus on the study of class by philosophers interested in

education for democracy and social justice.

Technology and Education

The relationship between technology and education is often considered to be

straightforward and basic. Technology is said to enhance, assist, or facilitate learning.

Technology therefore is seen primarily as a tool in schools. This concept of applying

technology within education attracted widespread attention among educational theorists in

the 1990s. The idea attracted negative and positive attention. In 1999, Nicholas Burbules and

Thomas Callister critically reviewed negative views of technology on education.[3] According

to negative views, the Internet would entail not deeper or more efficient learning, but

confusion and incoherency. Reading hyperlinked texts can take one surfing from world

history, to film, to pop culture, and to cute cats. Critics feared this would result in people

losing track of the logic in arguments, the plot points of books, and more generally devaluing

any focused or comprehensive treatment of subjects, in place of random surfing. Others

argued that technology was a threat because it was faddish, offering nothing essentially

educative but merely a new medium of instruction. Burbules has been consistently critical of

these perspectives, noting that while technology would undoubtedly change education, the

threats and challenges of online learning were also accompanied by opportunities for new

types of learning, new interests, new means of collaboration and knowledge production, and

so on.[4]

Here I argue for a different view of technology's relationship with education. A

broader understanding of technology undergirds my view. Following Brian Winston,

technology is not just something electronic or online or networked, but should be understood

more holistically as a performance of knowledge.[5] An arrowhead, a compass, a curriculum, and a school can all be understood as technologies. A website, a newspaper, and a cell phone are all technologies. Such technologies can be more or less educative. The idea that technology threatens or fails to serve education makes little sense from this perspective, which considers traditional school-based education as a kind (and as *one* kind) of learning technology. This perspective also enables a person to consider how schools evolve over time alongside other technologies, as spiraling *educative* technologies (in contrast with "educational technologies," traditionally conceived).

Within a broad historical context, the modern school and classroom can thus be seen as technologies of conformity, and of the Fordist approach to assembly line production.[6] This is a point Burbules capitalizes on, when he observes how many students do not find brick-and-mortar lecture halls more educational than online spaces for learning.[7] More recent technological moves in industry have been toward customization, niche marketing and tailoring production to the needs of the client. One might hope that education starts to turn more in that direction, given contemporary concentration on standardized tests and international comparisons. Internet technologies, with educative impact, certainly do reflect this trend, as will be discussed in the next section.

This perspective also encourages one to reconsider and broaden their understanding of what is an educational technology within the school. Again taking a historical view, one can observe, for instance, how writing with chalk on slate represented a major technological breakthrough, reducing the cost of writing materials by reusing slates continuously, at the same time as rendering the work of the pupil corrigible. The mass production of paper, and therefore a reduced cost of materials, had a major impact on educational settings, although it is not clear whether that was good or bad for the education of children.[8] Similarly, roller

blackboards and overhead projectors have come, and pretty much gone, without having much impact on the way that education has been conducted.

Mass printing technology has slowly impacted education. Before the introduction of moveable type, the purpose of the lecture, taken from the Latin verb for reading, was for the professor to read out the book so that students could copy it, thus making their own copy of the book.[9] With widespread and cheap printing, the literal recreation of a book was unnecessary, and the lecture could be recast for other purposes: to provide illustrative examples, to inspire, to provide context, to engage in critical discussion, or simply to address students' concerns about the meaning of the text. This recasting of the lecture is still a work in progress, even after several centuries. The introduction of the technology that permits teachers to reproduce their own customized materials for use in class is more recent. In the early 1970s, the photocopier was relatively new. Before that there had been the Gestetner machine and the spirit duplicator, which were messy and difficult to use.

The use of film and radio in schools was critically considered as early as the 1930s. The mood at the time was that these technologies could be used to prevent the curriculum being damaged by poor teachers, a recurrent theme of technology for "teacher-proofing" education. Why listen to a teacher reading the text for English language, when one could have George Orwell read his own work, or a dramatization with first-rate character actors? Why put up with a second-rate lecturer, when the best in the world could be recorded on film and used in school on demand? Joseph Lauwerys argued in this context that, for the most part, radio and film were being used to do things that were already being done, albeit that the new technology made it possible to do it better or more stylishly.[10] As reverberated in Burbules's work, Lauwerys argued that the important thing was to ask what the new technology made possible that had not been done before. In the mid-1960s, Nuffield Science started to introduce film as part of a science curriculum, so that, for example, a class could

watch the movement of a bird's wing in flight, or the movement of an animal's legs when running.[11] Because the film could be slowed down and repeated, it made it possible to examine physiological features that are not apparent to the observer who is not using film. This was a use for film that went beyond what could be done with simple apparatus in the classroom, and was therefore in the class of uses that Lauwerys highlighted.

The timeline here suggests that the recognition of new possibilities for a technology may take thirty or more years. This suggests that the use of computers, the Internet and social media may be too recent for us to yet expect to see them employed for educational activities that we have wanted to deploy, but have been unable to. The new technologies available on phones make it possible for every child to become an author in their own right. This is something that educators have wanted to see for a long time. Célestin Freinet pioneered a system of education in which pupils composed their own writings for publication in a school newspaper.[12] Seeing their own work taking on a finished and "official" form encouraged pupils to take pride in their work and motivated them to research topics of interest. The latest technology provides inexpensive ways of reproducing student work, making the dreams of Freinet immediately attainable. The only question is whether we can use them in those ways effectively. Many more aspects of educational technology could be considered in this way.

To summarize, technology is frequently introduced for its own sake in education, and not directly coupled to any particular educational goals. It can take schools a long time to catch up with the technology in society, and it may take a long time for educators to fully adopt a technology and adapt it to their own purposes. As a result, some of the technologies that have been available in for decades or even centuries have entered schools only more recently. The use of effective printing in schools to reproduce customized teaching materials was not really introduced into schools, even in the industrialized world, until the last quarter of the twentieth century. Those technologies that have been introduced have produced a

modest move away from centralized, standardized curricula geared to the textbook, but the changes in education have been slow compared with those in manufacturing and service industries. At the same time, educational ideals have been expounded over the centuries, extolling the virtue of encouraging children to express themselves, and the need to make available spaces in which children can express their creativity. This idea has been a continuous thread through educational philosophy since the end of the eighteenth century, but may perhaps now be given added impetus by the technology that is available today.

On the other hand, if we consider education as a form of technology, we can better recognize that there are other competing technologies that educate independently of schools. From the view that technologies can "teacher-proof" education runs the assumption that schooling is not as attractive, enticing, interactive or engaging as other information technologies, such as film and radio, and the Internet today. Advocates for media literacy now warn that media can make a negative educative impact on young people: teaching them problematic lessons; normalizing violence; perpetuating fear, stereotypes, xenophobia and other sense of threat and anxiety; encouraging consumption; and limiting the scope of voices and perspectives young people may be able to find and be receptive to. The extent to which these various fears are warranted, and the scale of such problems in terms of the numbers of youth impacted and the intensity, are difficult to identify. However, what is clear here is that the Internet, news media, and entertainment media, which operate and exist according to values outside of education, such as values of the corporate sector or other partisan political values, represent competitive educational technologies with those of formal schooling.

When it comes to social studies, the need to consider the impact of schooling versus that of online media is vital today. Today such topics as multiculturalism and globalization in the curricula are controversial, debated in textbook approval committees and by politicians. As a result, teachers and curricula are often not very clear or emphatic about such

controversial issues.[13] Their impact is unlikely to be much stronger than that of parents, friends, and peers, when it comes to learning about the social world. Contrast such formal social studies education with the use of media by the Trump election campaign and the pro-Brexit camp in the United Kingdom. In these latter cases, metadata on who would be receptive to which messages was compiled, analyzed, and used, to deliver targeted messages effectively. Educational researchers did not effectively predict this powerful use of message development and dissemination, which proved vital to political events in these cases and in others.

Class and Media

While educators have strived for decades to work in schools to enhance social mobility of students, media producers, historically and today, have had no such aim. Historically, media, initially printing, was used by elites. When media became open to mass consumption, and when mass consumption of media was made possible through greater mass education and greater literacy, printed media expanded beyond elite interests (including religious instruction), to commercial interests. As Benedict Anderson notes in his study of nationalism, the introduction of newspapers served intentionally to disseminate political and economic information, but it also served a secondary purpose, in producing national imagining:

> What were the characteristics of the first American newspapers, North or South? They began essentially as appendages of the market. Early gazettes contained—aside from news about the metropole—commercial news…as well as colonial political appointments, marriages of the wealthy, and so fourth. In other words, what brought together, on the same page, *this* marriage with *that* ship, *this* price with *that* bishop, was the very structure of the colonial administration and market-system itself. In this

way, the newspaper of Caracas quite naturally, and even apolitically, created an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellow-readers, to whom *these* ships, brides, bishops and process belonged.[14]

Later, studies of televised media revealed that there was no single, national audience, in the eyes of audience members themselves or television producers. Such studies also revealed that audiences were active, not passive, in making meaning from mediated messages. Stuart Hall found that television audiences do not passively take in media messages, but receive them actively, in various ways.[15] They may react negatively or positively. Some may sympathize with a message, agree with and endorse it, and internalize it as they reconfirm their preconceived views. Others may reject a source or instance of media, its premises, stance, and slant. They may internalize nothing of its messages, other than perhaps a more compounded negative view about that sort of media and/or its producer. The variation is based in part on the identities and experiences of the individuals. Today researchers interested in understanding the influence of media on society continue to debate:

> that media fostering of "nonchange"—or at least a reduction in the speed of change— may constitute the most important behavior-related aspect of the media. From this perspective, interracial buddy movies and desegregated TV news teams may actually retard the process of social change. Rather than role modeling integration, they may surreptitiously suggest that social change is occurring so rapidly and normally that additional special efforts are unnecessary.

> Then there is the issue of disinhibiting effects… Do movies that celebrate vigilantism contribute to societal violence by removing inhibitions to imitative behavior? Or do they reduce violence by providing viewers a catharsis for pent-up frustrations? Do films with teenage sex disinhibit such activity by making it appear normative and "safe," …Or do they provide a vicarious substitute for the real thing?[16]

Media producers online now send highly specialized messages, based on their use of personal data about their likely or actual consumers, including their social class, age, geographic location, race, gender, and more. Researchers understand that this process in many cases enhances people's tendencies to rely upon preconceived notions and base assumptions, which are also enabled and exacerbated by the way social networks develop "echo chambers," selectively making visible to consumers stories that they are likely to feel strongly about or agree or sympathize with.[17] The ability to predict media influence has also increased over time. This has tremendous value to private profit-oriented parties.

Media Mobilization

The early rise of Internet technology was met with much public and scholarly optimism, related to the potential democratization of information production and dissemination. Anyone can produce messages and share perspectives online. Likeminded people can come together to share sources, resulting potentially in a "global multitude," that could operate potentially against corporate, undemocratic, neoliberal interests.[18] In the early 2000s, Megan Boler observed how politically active young people engaged in protests which were largely organized and facilitated by their use of digital media, as televised political sources went online.[19] There has been undeniable excitement and global consciousness created through the increased access to wireless data through personal electronic devices (mostly mobile phones) around the world, resulting in ordinary people in rural, developing contexts being able to join global and regional civic discourse and debate more easily than they could a decade ago.

However, pro-democracy and pro-equity groups have not been the only ones to appreciate the impact of online media. Now everyone may have a voice, but the power to disseminate voices broadly still lies in the hands of media and corporate elites. Local media is

disappearing around the world today. "Default localism" has entailed larger media chains and organizations purchasing local media outlets due to local funding constraints; this has often had deleterious impacts on those sources' capacity to share distinctive or anti-neoliberal perspectives.[20] Social networks and online apps funded by advertisers are oriented more toward profits than educating or democracy, or democratizing information generally. They use personal data online to streamline experiences of users in ways that harmonize with the interests of advertisers.

Most recently, information has been revealed that Cambridge Analytica and related market research groups helped political campaigns intervene in shaping public attitudes and behavior, with significant impacts on the 2016 United States election of Trump and British vote to exit the European Union ("Brexit").[21] As I recently reflected on this case,

> With an impact that would be the envy of an ambitious dean of teaching and learning, these researchers used psychological, data-based theories, to consider whose views could be flexed, stretched and augmented, in what ways and towards what ends. And they apparently used that data to change views and behaviours at a significant level. Unlike traditional educators, masterminds of Trump and of Brexit did not aspire towards educating all equally or in a balanced way, for social justice or democracy.[22]

As other educational technologies like schools, the Internet can reproduce class rather than eliminate it, mobilizing people into action in increasingly polarized, oppositional groups. Online echo chambers encourage large-scale misunderstanding and misinformation about political opponents and culturally different groups. It can fuel not only sustained ignorance and misinformation among less traditionally educated, less traditionally informed, less traditionally literate groups in society (ordinary and poorer people). It can also enable misunderstanding among cultural and intellectual elites, scholars, and liberal educators, many of whom see poor people as bad guys and enemies, to be callously mocked by morally self-

righteous pundits; or else as pitiful, essentially ignorant and/or intellectually or epistemically inferior.[23] If education and philosophy are to have any use in this political and civic context, greater attention to class in educational theory is warranted.

Conclusion: The Need to Return to Class Analysis

Although the revolt against the 'end of nations' was surprising to some scholars, it was not entirely surprising to many educational theorists. In the United States many philosophers of education have given sustained attention to understanding such topics as white strategic ignorance and denial.[24] Many educators and philosophers of education identify as social justice educators across societies around the world today, cognizant of the need for education to respond to and teach against the rise of sectarianism and populism.

However, there can be a disconnect with understanding class in contemporary work on political consciousness and political attitudes in educational theorizing. A few years back, I conducted an analysis of all articles in the Philosophy of Education Society Archive online, which contained at that time the last 20 volumes of the annual *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* Philosophy of Education Society conference proceedings. The analysis began with a search through the roughly one thousand articles in the archive for key terms throughout all text, such as 'class', 'socioeconomic', 'poverty', and others. Through this exercise, three essays were found that focused on class or socioeconomic status over the last 20 years. The overwhelming majority of references to class used the term to recognize class as a factor in inequality, diversity, and identity, without communicating anything about it. They recognized class within a "kitchen sink" approach to acknowledging difference through listing categories, such as race, class, gender, ability, and so on. This approach does not aim to substantively describe or discuss the social categories.[25] Susan Laird expressed in 1997 that, "Obviously most philosophers of education are academic women and men and therefore

either working class or middle class, yet few write consciously from their gendered location and even fewer from their economic locations past or present."[26] This statement remains largely true today.

There are some stumbling blocks to academics understanding class phenomena in education carefully. For one, recent theorizing of diversity often invokes awareness of insider/outsider status, and emphasizes that people should be able to represent themselves rather than possibly be misrecognized by others.[27] When it comes to class, this may imply that wealthy people are less authoritative about experiencing poverty than poorer people. Meanwhile, socioeconomically advantaged members of society typically gain academic authority, while less advantaged members of society who become academics and intellectual usually change their social class in the process, as a result of upward mobility. This means that no academic's experience can be generalized as an impoverished one.[28] Even if an academic is impoverished, they are not ordinary members of the working or poor social classes.

Second, class is still invisible and largely taboo in higher education, apart from its place (and lack thereof) in much scholarly writing. Most people in academia do not see or recognize class or discuss class. There is a tendency to equalize experiences, as educated people often regard it as unfashionable or impolite to mention, or draw any attention to class. Finally, poor people have always been vilified in society at large. In particular, poor white people have been increasingly vilified by intellectual elites in recent years, with mainstream news regularly depicting Trump supporters not as socioeconomically and racially diverse, but as poor, white, racist, ignorant, uneducated, and mentally and psychologically deficient.[29] As I noted recently, "one risks being identified with this group, as morally unenlightened, for pointing class out as significant. He risks being read quickly as sympathizing with racism."[30]

Nonetheless, part and parcel of coming to terms with today's public education as conducted through the Internet and primarily through social media today is understanding how classes are now being shaped and formed through online communication and mobilized with the use of personal data by private online companies and interest groups against democratic and public interests. Seeing the uneducated poorer classes as lacking or deficient, in capacity or in information, is not an adequate, informed, or helpful response to witnessing the perspectives and behaviors of ordinary and poor people. Ordinary and poor members of society have perspectives, knowledge, and education, which remain largely unknown to scholars and academic elites. They are mobilized by these factors. It should come as no surprise that if the perspectives, knowledge, and educational inputs of ordinary and poor people are unknown to scholars, their behavior and their mobilization will also be misunderstood. Traditionally, poor people have been regarded as uneducated. However, as I have argued here, education must be reconceptualized today, given the power of online technology over brick-and-mortar schools over information dissemination and social mobilization today.

To summarize, this paper has aimed to explore intersections of education, technology, and class. It has urged a revised view of education as a competing technology alongside the Internet, in disseminating information and influencing people today. As schools reproduce class offline, I have also explored how the Internet and social media reproduce class online. Yet unlike most school, most online media and information sources are provided for profit and private benefit rather than public benefit. Therefore, Internet producers can mobilize groups for democratic or undemocratic ends. In this context, the split between wealthy and educated elites and scholars and ordinary and poor people is further apart than ever before. Misunderstanding reins as academics do not understanding the mediated world of uneducated counterparts in society. In this context, class must be returned to in scholarship, to understand

how classes are mobilized as such these days, moving theorization away from traditional views of social mobility and of social mobilization, where people are put into a binary of educated or uneducated, empowered and knowledgeable or impoverished and ignorant. Such work is necessary to adequately understand social mobility and social mobilization looking into the future.

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