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«The World Unplugged» and «24 Hours without Media»: Media Literacy to Develop Self-Awareness Regarding Media

«El mundo desconectado» y «24 horas sin medios»: alfabetización mediática para la conciencia crítica de los jóvenes

Abstract

Across the globe, many students have easy and constant access to media, yet they often receive little or no instruction about the impact of their media consumption. This article outlines a «24 hours without media» exercise in accordance with the guidelines set in Module 7, Unit 1 of the UNESCO curriculum. In the fall of 2010, nearly 1,000 students from a dozen universities across five continents took part in «The World Unplugged» study. Researchers at the University of Maryland gathered students' narrative responses to the going without media assignment and analyzed them by using grounded theory and analytic abduction, assisted by IBM's ManyEyes computer analysis software. Results showed that going without media made students dramatically more cognizant of their own media habits –with many self-reporting an «addiction» to media– a finding further supported by a clear majority in every country admitting outright failure of their efforts to go unplugged. Students also reported that having constant access to digital technology is integral to their personal identities; it is essential to the way they construct and manage their work and social lives. «The World Unplugged» exercise enabled experiential learning; students gained increased self-awareness about the role of media in their lives and faculty came to better understand the Internet usage patterns of their students, enhancing their ability to help young people become more media literate.

Resumen

La mayoría de los jóvenes del mundo se conectan habitualmente a los medios de comunicación; sin embargo, en pocas ocasiones reciben formación respecto a los impactos que este consumo mediático tiene en ellos mismos. Este artículo expone la experiencia llevada a cabo en el marco del Currículum UNESCO, denominada «24 horas sin medios». En otoño de 2010, cerca de 1.000 estudiantes de 12 universidades de cuatro continentes participaron en el estudio «El mundo desconectado». Investigadores de la Universidad de Maryland (Estados Unidos) recogieron rigurosamente las reflexiones de los alumnos que participaron y las analizaron a través del programa estadístico IBM's ManyEyes. Los resultados muestran que los jóvenes, a raíz del ejercicio, fueron más conscientes de sus hábitos mediáticos, y muchos de ellos indagaron sobre su propia «adicción» a los medios, mientras que otros no consiguieron siquiera concluir estas 24 horas sin medios. También se pone en evidencia que el acceso cotidiano a la tecnología digital forma parte ya de su identidad juvenil y son básicas para entender su forma de trabajar y sus relaciones sociales. También se demuestra que los alumnos aumentaron su autoconciencia sobre el papel de los medios de comunicación en sus vidas, y el profesorado comenzó a comprender mejor los intereses de sus alumnos, así como sus parámetros de consumo de Internet, mejorando sus habilidades para ayudar a los jóvenes a estar más alfabetizados mediáticamente.

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1. Introduction

Increasingly, university students across the globe have constant access to media. They can read and share information, connect with friends and family, and be «plugged in» no matter their setting due to widespread Internet access and a plethora of mobile devices. Recent studies, focused primarily on secondary school students, illustrate the extent to which young people live in a media-saturated world. Students are increasingly reliant on mobile devices for their news and entertainment (Nielsen 2009) and are tethered to social media sites (Lenhart et al. 2010). Eight- to 18-year-olds consume more than 7.5 hours of media daily, with the majority of time spent viewing television content, listening to music, using the computer and playing video games (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010).

As a consequence, media literacy scholars have suggested (Hobbs & Frost 2003) that media literacy curricula in K-12 environments include activities that invite students to reflect on and analyze their own media consumption habits. And indeed, Module 7, Unit 1 of the UNESCO Curriculum, «Internet Opportunities and Challenges», actively promotes the concept of media self-awareness in two of its learning objectives: «Understand young people's Internet usage patterns and interests» and «Develop their ability to use educational methods and basic tools to help young people use the Internet responsibly – and make them aware of the related opportunities, challenges and risks». Yet students often receive little or no instruction about the possible consequences of their media use (Thoman & Jolls, 2004; Puddephatt, 2006; Livingstone, 2004; Martens, 2010).

Students cannot learn how to fully participate in their societies as citizens and consumers, nor can they have a full appreciation for the roles of media in their lives, until they have taken a close look at their own media diet. Media literacy educators need to identify learning experiences in which students can reach their own conclusions about how to «fully participate as citizens and consumers in a media-saturated society» (Hobbs 2004: 44). As the Kaiser Family Foundation report notes, «Understanding the role of media in young people's lives is essential for those concerned about promoting the healthy development of children and adolescents». Current media literacy curricula teaches students to access, analyze, evaluate, communicate and create media (De Andrea, 2011; Rogow, 2004). But recent media literacy research, including «The World Unplugged» study outlined in this article, suggest that a sixth skill of self-awareness should be added to this rubric. Before students can effectively analyze and evaluate media texts, they should be given the opportunity to become aware of how they access and use media.

In the fall of 2010, researchers at the University of Maryland, College Park, USA led a global study, titled «The World Unplugged,» to address this educational objective. «The World Unplugged» study was based on a «24 hours without media» project first assigned at the University of Maryland earlier that year, in spring semester 2010. Students in a core media literacy university course had been asked to go media-free for 24 hours and then blog about their experience: to report their successes, admit to any failures, and generally reflect on what they learned about their own consumption of media. The Maryland «24 hours without media» exercise offered university students an opportunity to track their own connectedness, and then analyze how they themselves could mitigate or prevent negative consequences of their media use.

More than 200 students took part in that spring 2010 assignment, and in the aggregate students wrote more than 110,000 words about their experiences. After institutional review board (IRB) approval, that rich data became a research study, and the online release of the results[1] attracted a great deal of media attention both in the United States and internationally.

Researchers from that study presented their results to the partner universities of the Salzburg Academy of Media & Global Change during its 2010 July-August session. A dozen universities

expressed interest in participating in a comparable global research project. As a result, that fall nearly 1,000 students from 10 countries[2] took part in a 24-hour media-free exercise that formed the basis for the «The World Unplugged» research.

The international «The World Unplugged» version of the «24 hours without media» exercise provided students across five continents with an opportunity to become more self-aware about how much they depend on media in their daily lives and how much media both enhance as well as circumscribe their activities and relationships. As one UK-based student said after completing the exercise: «We feel the need to be plugged in to media all day long. Our lives basically revolve around it. It is the way we are informed about news, about gossip, the way we communicate with friends and plan our days».

2. Methods

A dozen universities in 10 countries (Argentina, Chile, China-mainland, China-Hong Kong, Lebanon, Mexico, Slovakia, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America) on five continents (Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and South America) participated in «The World Unplugged Project».

Students at all the universities completed «The World Unplugged» project in a 24-hour period between September and December 2010, dependent on each university's semester calendar and curricular needs. All 12 universities shared the same assignment template, a translation of it, or a close copy adapted for an individual country and/or university[3]. In advance of their participation, students were not told about previous students' experiences or the results of a prior study in order to avoid influencing their expectations and therefore the perception of their experiences during the exercise.

In the global study, as in the first U.S. – based one, participants at the various universities were asked to complete a SurveyMonkey online poll that included basic demographic data, including country of origin, racial identity, age, gender, religious identity, as well as questions about their ownership and use of particular media devices (e.g. Do you own a mobile phone or MP3 player? How many hours do you spend each day playing video games or on social-networking sites?).

Students' narrative responses were gathered by the universities and collected by researchers at the University of Maryland. Responses in Chinese from Chongqing University were translated in China by university translators; other non-English responses were translated at the University of Maryland by native language speakers, assisted by automatic translation software.

The total number of words in the collected student responses totaled nearly 500,000 – about as many words as Leo Tolstoy's «War and Peace».[4] After the data collection (and translation when needed) of those responses across the 12 global universities, the analytic process followed a combined approach using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) and analytic abduction as suggested by Peirce (1955). The process of analytical abduction can be best described as a continuous back and forth between empirical data and preexisting theoretical constructs. Researchers first analyzed the data using grounded theory, which allowed nuanced understanding of participants' personal essays and could take into account cultural, social, economic and political distinctions among the participants from 4 continents, then analytic abduction followed.

Before starting the analysis, researchers were trained to ensure coder reliability. All responses were read at a minimum by two researchers. In the first reading of the responses, researchers isolated categories and keywords that emerged from student's responses. Each researcher individually identified these categories. There was significant convergence in the categories and variations concerning the identification of keywords were reconciled (Strauss, Corbin & Lynch 1990). For instance three researchers used the responses to generate categories around a list of emotional words and devices, and then grouped them accordingly. Terms such as «dependence», «addiction», and «withdrawal» were gathered under a «Dependence» category, while words such as «peaceful», «relief», and «happy» were gathered under a «Benefits of Unplugging» category. The keywords were then plugged into IBM's ManyEyes software, which allowed researchers to highlight the different socio-cultural, technological and socio-behavioral classifications that were found within the responses. These categories were developed primarily on the emotional reactions to the experiment and reactions to the experiment based on the student's relationship to a particular type of medium (mobile phone or TV, for example).

Following the computer-assisted analysis of the data, the responses were hand-coded by at least two researchers, and then reevaluated by a second team of researchers who then further organized, analyzed and wrote up the data by country, by medium and by emotional response. The findings of both the narrative responses and the quantitative surveys were released on a dedicated website.

With the participation of 1,000 people globally, the Unplugged study could not be a representative sampling of students around the world; in the aggregate the data reflect only a snapshot of possible responses to going without media in the 12 universities and in the 10 countries that participated. It is worth noting as well that the sample size of participating students varied among universities, as did the size of the entire student populations of the participating universities from which participants were drawn. Still, despite vast differences among the participating schools and countries –geographic, political, religious and economic– researchers found striking consistencies in the responses of students. The ubiquity and dependence on social media and mobile devices, in particular, extended to every university from Uganda to Hong Kong, from the UK to Chile. In their media use students in this study appear to relate to each other in ways that transcend disparate national origins.

3. Results

Going without media during «The World Unplugged» study made students more cognizant of the presence of media – both media's benefits and limitations. But perhaps what students became most aware of was their absolute inability to direct their lives without media. The depths of the «addiction» that students reported prompted some to confess that they had learned that they needed to curb their media habits. Most students doubted they would have much success, but they acknowledged that their reliance on media was to some degree self-imposed and actually inhibited their ability to manage their lives as fully as they hoped – to make proactive rather than reactive choices about work and play.

There were multiple major findings across countries. Among the top results:

1) Students around the world repeatedly used the language of «addiction» and dependency to speak about their media habits. «Media is my drug; without it I was lost», said one student from the UK. «I am an addict. How could I survive 24 hours without it?». A student from Argentina observed: «Sometimes I felt 'dead». A student from Slovakia simply noted: «I felt sad, lonely and depressed».

2) A clear majority in every country admitted outright failure of their efforts to go unplugged. The failure rate didn't appear to relate to the relative affluence of the country, or students' personal access to a range of devices and technologies. The research documented that students failed because of how essential and pervasive digital technologies had become in their lives. «It was a difficult day …a horrible day», said a student from Chile. «After this, I can't live without media! I need my social webs, my cell phone, my Mac, my mp3 always!». Students also reported how desperately bored they were when they were unplugged. «I literally didn't know what to do with myself», said one student from the UK. «Going down to the kitchen to pointlessly look in the cupboards became a regular routine, as did getting a drink».

3) Students reported that media –especially their mobile phones– have literally become an extension of themselves, integral to their personal identities. Said a student from the UK: «Unplugging my ethernet cable feels like turning off a life support system». For many students, going without media for 24 hours ripped back the curtain on their hidden loneliness. «When I couldn't communicate with my friends» by mobile phone, reported a student from China, «I felt so lonely as if I was in a small cage on an island». And the problems for some students went beyond loneliness. Some came to recognize that 'virtual' connections had been substituting for real ones – their relationship to media was one of the closest «friendships» they had. Wrote a student from Chile: «I felt lonely without multimedia. I arrived at the conclusion that media is a great companion».

4) Students reported that being tethered to digital technology 24/7 is not just a habit, it is essential to the way they construct and manage their friendships and social lives. The leading social media site across all five continents in the study was Facebook. Students reported that how they use social media shapes how others think of them and how they think about themselves. «There is no doubt that Facebook is really high profile in our daily life», said a student from Hong Kong. «Everybody uses it to contact other persons, also we use it to pay attention to others».

5) Many students said that although they knew they could be distracted at times, they hadn't been fully aware of how much time they committed to social networking and how poorly they actually were able to multitask. «I usually study and chat or listen to music at the same time so I won't be bored and feel asleep», wrote a student from Lebanon. «But what I mainly realized is that… when you really get off the media you realize… how many quality things you can do».

6) Students noted they use different communication tools to reach different types of people. Students can simultaneously be on multiple communication platforms, but in different ways: They call their mothers, they text and Skype Chat close friends, they Facebook with their social groups, they email their professors and employers. Students consider and sort through all these permuta-

tions automatically, but the implications are real for how they construct their personas and social networks.

7) Most students reported that they rarely search for «hard» news at mainstream news sites. Instead they inhale, almost unconsciously, the news that is served up on the sidebar of their email account, on friends' Facebook walls, and on Twitter. Because social media are increasingly the way students reported getting their news and information, very few students mentioned any traditional news outlets by name.

8) Many students noted some benefits to their media-free exercise: a sense of liberation or freedom, a feeling of peace and contentment, better communication with close friends and family, and more time to do things they had been neglecting. Rarely, but in cases across the globe, students expressed a desire to set aside time to go media-free again in the future.

9) Some students commented on the positive qualitative differences in even close relationships during the period they went unplugged. «I interacted with my parents more than the usual», reported a student in Mexico. «I fully heard what they said to me without being distracted with my BlackBerry. I helped to cook and even to wash the dishes». A student from the U.S. wrote: «I've lived with the same people for three years now, they're my best friends, and I think that this is one of the best days we've spent with together. I was able to really see them, without any distractions, and we were able to revert to simple pleasures».

4. Discussion

The primary value of conducting a «24 hours without media» assignment is in the increased self-awareness students gain with regard to the role of media in their lives. Self-awareness is fundamental to empowerment – in order to understand how to make responsible use of the Internet, students must first become aware of their own usage patterns and behaviors. Thus, the assignment addresses the learning objectives of Unit 1 of Module 7 of the UNESCO curriculum by helping teachers understand the Internet usage patterns and interests of students, developing teachers' ability to help young people use the Internet responsibly, and prompting students to themselves become more aware of the opportunities, challenges and risks the Internet provides.

Module 7, «Internet Opportunities and Challenges», opens by stating that «Taking part in the information society is essential for citizens of all age groups». It is often assumed that young people –considered «digital natives» who grew up in a wired world– are fully aware of their own media habits, as well as the benefits and pitfalls of living in an information society. As Module 7 notes, this is not the case. Young people, while being able to benefit both from the resources available on the Internet and the ever-growing roster of web-enabled mobile devices, remain a vulnerable population. But rather than advocating a protectionist approach, UNESCO's Curriculum rightly suggests that «The best way to help them stay out of harm's way is to empower and educate them on how to avoid or manage risks related to Internet use» (UNESCO 128).

The «Unplugged» study has added a global perspective to the growing body of literature on the media habits of college students, which includes research on the level of student involvement with electronic media as it relates to leisure activities (Kamalipour, Robinson & Nortman, 1998), an investigation into the relationship between frequency of Facebook use, participation in Facebook activities, and student engagement (Junco, R. 2011) and a case study of whether a social media site designed for students can help students make the transition from high school to college (DeAndrea & al., 2011). The «Unplugged» study provided a comprehensive picture of students' media use because it asked them to reflect on media broadly defined – from video games to cell phone use to Facebook visits.

The U.S. – based «24 hours without media» study began in early 2010 as an assignment to teach students to be more mindful about their media consumption patterns. However, the instructors quickly realized the didactic potential of the visceral experiences the conscious and self-administered media withdrawal provided. Instead of simply hearing a lecture about how media have influenced society, students experienced first-hand how media shape their daily behavior and access to information. Overnight the experiment enlightened the students about their media usage. Very few of the students had previously reflected about their media consumption patterns; after this exercise, they expressed a more conscious appreciation of how their media use enabled, determined and influenced their own behavior and socio-cultural location.

4. Impact on students and teaching

Educators around the world can reproduce the simple «one-day without media» exercise. As the two studies discussed in this article suggest, such an exercise heightens students' awareness of

their own media habits and additionally leads to a more deliberate use and understanding of mediated information and media technologies.

Instructors face a choice when determining how best to educate students about the benefits and challenges of living in an age of infinite information. Lecturing students about the importance of being media literate, showing them statistics about how much time people their age spend on their computers, phones and other mobile devices, and exposing them to research about the effects of being constantly «plugged in» is one delivery method. But research suggests that a more effective way of educating and empowering students is to let them discover these lessons for themselves (Berkeley, 2009).

A compelling way to get students thinking about how reliant they are on media is to take everything away from them and have them reflect on the consequences (Moeller, 2009; NAMLE, 2007; Singh & al., 2010). A day-without-media exercise enables experiential learning as described by Kolb and Fry (1975). The four-step experiential learning model derived from Lewin (1948), Dewey (1963) and Piaget (1973) argues that higher involvement leads to better learning. Kolb and Fry (1975) proposed that an experience is followed by observations of the experience. Such experiential observations help form abstract concepts, which in turn can be tested in new experiential situations. Similar to Kolb and Fry's model, the «24 hours without media» project begins with an experiential exercise. This is followed by a written reflection, which is used to reinforce key media literacy concepts that can be further strengthened in activities throughout a semester of work. In other words, the 24-hour exercise creates a basis upon which students can relate, reflect and analyze subjects and topics introduced in media literacy readings, lectures and discussions.

An additional value of the exercise is its open-endedness. The exercise as designed requires students to decide when over a preset time period they will go for a day without media. That requirement ensures that even before the media fast, students have to be reflective about the patterns of their media use in order to determine their personally optimum time for abstaining from media. In «The World Unplugged» study, some students prioritized the role of media in facilitating their social life, and so avoided conducting their media-free period over a weekend. Other students determined that they needed to use media in their coursework and outside jobs and so selected a weekend 24-hour period. No matter their choice, the fact of their being forced to make a conscious decision contributed to the students proactively evaluating media's roles in their lives.

The «24 hours without media» exercise also creates a shared group experience that encourages animated class participation. The common experience fosters closer bonds among students, which also often inspires more active student engagement with the class and each other, an advantage especially for any later class group projects.

In an effort to enhance students' learning beyond the classroom, faculty implementing this exercise may find it useful to encourage student-run media to report on their peers participating in this project. News coverage of the exercise can reinforce for students who are participating that what they are doing has meaning outside their own classroom, and it can communicate to students who are not themselves going «unplugged» the powerful impact of media on daily lives and work.

5. Recommendations for teachers

The «24 hours without media» exercise enables teachers to gauge how their specific population of young people uses media. Such an exercise provides both teachers and students with current data (rather than statistics from some other group at some other time) that can be referenced throughout a semester or year-long course of study. The «24 hours without media» exercise allows students to critically examine their own specific media habits and see how their media-free experience compares to that of their immediate peers. Because this assignment requires self-examination and reflection rather than memorization or research, it is the experience of these researchers that the lessons learned remain with students.

The appeal of the «24 hours without media» exercise is in its simplicity. Teachers the world over are always looking for exercises that are easy to explain and implement, require few resources, take little time to complete and produce tangible results. Laying out the details of the media-free assignment is simple. All students need to know is that they are to refrain from using any form of media (from mobile phones to the Internet, from radio to television) for one full 24-hour period within a designated timeframe, and that they are to write about their experience immediately after finishing their media-free period. Teachers need not do any preparation for this assignment beyond articulating exactly what they want students to write about in their response essay – usually a mixture of logistics of the day, what technologies were missed most and what kind of emotions were felt during and after the exercise. Prior to the exercise, teachers should not explain to stu-

dents why they are being given this assignment, nor should they provide students with any background (including past students' experience or news coverage) about the exercise, as student should come into this assignment with as few preconceptions as possible.[5]

Beyond the simplicity of the «unplugged» exercise, the exercise is also appealing because of its portability: it can be used in all media environments and in many classroom settings. The assignment meets students where they are: if they live in an immersive «broadband» environment, then students will likely need to forego for 24 hours a broad range of media, from mobile and digital technologies, to print and broadcast ones. If students are in a more limited media environment, they may only have to forego one or two media outlets—for example a mobile phone and the radio. In either case, students will emerge from the exercise more mindful of how, when and why they use media, and what the impact of their use is on their intellectual, social, political and family life.

The «24 hours without media» exercise is appropriate for use in both secondary schools and at colleges seeking to promote critical thinking, media awareness and media literacy (The researchers have also consulted with middle schools that have adapted the exercise for younger students). The exercise can also be used across discipline and in all size classes. Journalism classes can use it as an introduction to the ways in which young people access information in the twenty-first century, the growth of user-generated content and the changing definition of the term «news». Communication studies courses can use it as a starting point for a discussion about how audiences process information and increasingly expect to engage in two-way conversations with content producers. Political science courses can use it to discuss how changes in technology affect the state of political discourse and engagement. However and wherever it is used, «24 hours without media» fits well as an introductory assignment that gets students talking about their media use and the role and authority of media in their own environments. Teachers can use lessons learned from this exercise to broaden their class discussions however they see fit.

Researchers note that the «24 hours without media» assignment can be variously adapted to serve specific purposes. Teachers can assign students to spend more than 24 hours without media, to go media-free on a specific day, or to only forego certain types of media. The assignment can be adapted by asking students to go 24 hours without media and then immediately afterward asking students to track their regular media use for 24 hours. Students can also be asked to repeat the assignment over the course of a semester to create a more longitudinal study. Teachers can exercise freedom in establishing the parameters of the exercise, without considerably diminishing the impact of the project on students or limiting the rather sophisticated comprehension the teachers themselves gain about how their students find, share and experience media.

As a UK-based student who participated in «The World Unplugged» study said: «I'd actually recommend anyone take part in the challenge, as it heightens your awareness to how much we as people rely on media for so many things». Such student reactions to the «24 hours without media» exercise make a compelling case for such an assignment to become a core part of any media literacy course in secondary schools and universities around the world.

Notes
1 www.withoutmedia.wordpress.com. (12-01-2012).
2 Universities participating in «The World Unplugged» (2010-11) study were as follows: Lead University: University of Maryland, College Park – School of Journalism (USA); American University of Beirut – Department of Social/Behavioral Sciences (Lebanon); Bournemouth University – Media School (United Kingdom); Chinese University of Hong Kong – School of Journalism and Communication (China/Hong Kong); Chongqing University – Literature and Journalism (China); Hofstra University – School of Communication (USA); Hong Kong Shue Yan University – Department of Journalism and Communication (China/Hong Kong); Makerere University – Department of Mass Communication (Uganda); Pontificia Universidad Catolica – School of Journalism (Argentina); Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile – School of Journalism (Chile); Universidad Iberoamericana – Department of Communications (Mexico); University of St. Cyril and Methodius – Marketing and Mass Media (Slovakia).

3 The template assignment gave to the dozen universities is available in the following link: www.without-media.wordpress.com/about/(12-01-2012).

4 That total number of words is approximate because many of the students who participated in the global study did not write about their experiences in English.

5 In recent semesters, professors at some of the participating international universities have assigned students following their own «unplugged» exercise to read press coverage about the results of the two studies discussed here. As the widespread news media interest indicates, the results of these two studies have received attention not only from academics engaged in media literacy research but from journalists and the digital technology community.

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