Toward Digital Life: Embracing, Complicating, and Reconceptualizing Digital Literacy in Communication Design

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Emerging technologies are broadly and rapidly embraced for their promise of making tasks easier and faster, making us healthier, more efficient, more effective, and more connected. Yet the allure of personalized experiences may obscure the massive amounts of data that are collected, mined, and used to influence personal behavior. The public understanding of affordances, limitations, and potential dangers of those emerging technologies has not always kept up with rates of their adoption. Importantly, the digital has become so deeply woven into our everyday lives that the ways it shapes our experiences are often invisible and sometimes insidious. While prominent events bring conversations about the digital onto center stage at least for certain spans of time—for example, period tracking apps post-Roe v. Wade, the unprecedented rise in hate speech on Twitter after acquisition by Elon Musk, bans on TikTok on government and school networks, and concerns about ChatGPT—these conversations often fade into the background as a "new" technology emerges. But the recurring nature of these conversations illustrates the urgent need to address our increasingly digital lives. Further, the proliferation of ever-evolving workplace technologies has placed increasing emphasis on teaching tools and skills for industry practice in technical and professional communication (TPC) classrooms alongside critical thinking, problem solving, and other transferable literacy skills (Henschel & Melonçon, 2014; Slattery, 2005; Whiteside, 2003). Even as teachers focus on teaching various transferable literacy skills, college graduates are feeling unprepared for success in a digital world. Therefore, there is an urgent need to turn our attention to the design of our digital lives.

This special issue seeks to open a space for conversation about literacy/literacies in technical and professional communication (TPC), user experience (UX), and communication design (CD) pedagogies, praxes, and methodologies. The fields of TPC, UX, and CD, and writing and education writ large are increasingly engaging with issues around "the digital" (e.g., the internet, mobile and emerging technologies, AI and algorithms) and grappling with ways to prepare students for engagement in ever-more-digital spaces, workplaces, and communities. Within the Building Digital Literacy research cluster at the Digital Life Institute (BDL@DLI), we have been working in recent years to address these issues; however, as conversations around topics like the implications of ChatGPT on education reach a fever pitch, we feel on the cusp of a turn, when the size, scope, and complexity of issues around the digital make it necessary to revisit, embrace, complicate, and/or reconceptualize digital literacy. We feel the moment is right to bring together new and diverse scholarship around considering a shift toward *digital life* as an organizing framework for thinking about how to foster the entangled ways of knowing (i.e., literacies, skills, and/or competencies) necessary for engagement as a technical communicator and human in 21st century society. To that end, in what follows, we sketch out this special issue's focus, our past research as a way of acknowledging our scholarly positionality and key literacy scholarship we draw on, and our move

in this special issue toward sketching out the future, or the turn toward *digital life* as an organizing concept.

Special Issue Focus

We envision that a critical approach and focus on social justice as it relates to digital life will be one of the strengths of this issue. The editors aim to bring together a diverse group of scholars to examine issues of digital literacy and to help develop an idea of digital life that is grounded in research and practice (e.g., TPC, UX, and CD) relevant to the CDQ readership. A second strength we aim for is interdisciplinarity; as editors, we have ties to various disciplinary and sub-disciplinary areas—including rhetoric, technical communication, user experience, disability studies, intercultural communication, collaboration, and information literacy—and are dedicated to a broad scope for the special issue. Lastly, we ask authors to engage with literacy as multifaceted, slippery, and embedded in our everyday lives. Literacy is a term used frequently across many disciplines, including in our own work within BDL@DLI (Burnham and Tham, 2021; Davis et al., 2021; Duin, Pedersen & Tham, 2021; Duin & Tham, 2018). Yet, *digital* literacy remains often ill-defined or poorly differentiated from/connected to other literacies and there "is no agreement in the literature about whether this term (digital literacy)—or any other term—is most accurate in describing what now constitutes the goal of effective writing and communication in digital environments" (Spilka, 2010, p. 6). As Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola (1999) put it, "too easily does 'literacy' slip off our tongues … and get put next to other terms … too much is hidden by 'literacy,' we think, too much packed into those letters—too much that we are wrong to bring with us, implicitly or no" (p. 349). Literacy is also often invoked as a cure-all that is meant to solve many classroom or societal problems, though "literacy alone—some set of basic skills—is not what improves people's lives" (Wysocki & Johnson-Eilola, 1999, p. 353). Thus, to open a broader conversation, we invite scholars to submit article proposals aimed at embracing, complicating, extending, pushing back on and reconceptualizing digital literacy and digital life while connecting to broader TPC/UX/CD and interdisciplinary scholarship with the aim of theorizing the turn that we see on the horizon.

BDL@DLI and Key Literacy Scholarship

In BDL@DLI, our approach to digital literacy to date has been to recognize that digital technologies augment how we as humans navigate the world. Rather than separate the human from the non-human, we recognize how human and technology (e.g., AI) spheres augment each other and intersect with our everyday lives, and thus form the fabric of digital life. This becomes increasingly important as we use wearable technologies (such as fitness trackers, smart watches, etc.) and so augment our everyday life through surveillance and data analytics. In this, "we are trackable, predictable, and hackable" (Digital Life Institute, 2020, n.p.). And while the promise of personal data and smart devices promote a "quantified self"—a data-driven interpretation of the self—we recognize the tension between privacy, surveillance, and autonomy in the use of various technologies. The inherent contradiction between the promise of a better life through technologies, data analytics, AI, and the concerns for human autonomy, privacy, and self-determination require a redefinition of digital literacy.

Much work on digital literacy has demonstrated how it is multifaceted and articulated through overlapping skills or competencies (Bourelle et al., 2017; Breuch, 2002; Burnham & Tham, 2021;

Davis et al., 2021, 2022; Hovde & Renguette, 2017; Joint Information Systems Committee, 2014; Selber, 2004). Further, at BDL@DLI, we align with Cargile Cook's (2002) theory of layered literacies, as we understand digital literacy to be deeply entwined with information, media, technology, coding, health, social, ethical, and financial literacies. Our aim by framing the issue of literacies in the 21st century as one of *digital life* is to foreground how the digital permeates and influences essentially all spheres of our lives. In updating Donald Norman's classic theory of affordances (1988), Jenny Davis (2020) argues for a critical approach that understands technology *what* objects afford (or make possible), we should ask "*how*, *for whom*, and *under what circumstances*" they afford (p. 11) in order to surface their power and politics. Importantly, TPC's central focus on user advocacy and UX (Jones, 2016; Rose 2016; Rose et al., 2018), the rhetorical situation (Cargile Cook, 2002; Davis et al., 2021), engaging with wicked problems (Wickman, 2014), and centering social justice (Walton et al., 2019), as well as both preparing students for TPC-specific careers and widely delivering TPC service courses to a broad variety of majors, situates TPC as a field especially well-suited to taking up the issue of developing pedagogies, praxes, and methodologies for digital life.

Toward a Post-Digital Framework for Digital Life: Inviting Your Work

The editors, members of BDL@DLI, offer the following three ideas that have emerged from our collaborative work as a way of grounding how we define digital life:

1. Digital life is inevitable, and requires sufficient literacies, skills, competencies, and/or ways of knowing to fully participate in personal, social, and professional realms;
2. Social justice and socially-just pedagogy can contribute to students' critical engagement with and ethical contribution to praxes of digital life;
3. Building the literacies, skills, competencies, and/or ways of knowing required for participation in digital life is a collaborative and ongoing effort.

We invite submissions that engage, push back on, complicate, and/or extend this definitional work; while we have done work in digital literacy, we do not ask nor require submissions to cite or engage BDL@DLI work specifically.

Of critical importance are issues of equity, inclusion, and justice. As noted above, we feel the size, scope, and complexity of issues around the digital make it necessary to revisit, embrace, complicate, and/or reconceptualize digital literacy within the context of social justice. For example, we have grappled with wondering whether literacy—as a somewhat slippery term, one which may carry historical baggage and links to oppression (Brandt, 2001; Byrd et al., 2021; Jones & Williams, 2018; Selfe, 1999; Stuckey, 1991; Wysocki & Johnson-Eilola, 1999)—is even the best framework for approaching the concept of digital life. When noting how scholars tend to use literacy "as a metaphor for everything else," Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola ask, "When we speak of the relationship we hope to establish-for ourselves and for our students-with newer technologies, do we want to carry forward all these particular attachments and meanings and possibilities?" (1999, p. 360). Nearly 25 years later, that question is more crucial than ever, when emerging technologies like AI blur the line between "artificial" and "real," "human" and "non-human." In this "post-digital" age (Hodgson, 2019), when we cannot easily delineate between who we are and what we do with technology, we circle back to Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola and their call to "unpack"

the idea of digital literacy and its hidden assumptions. Importantly, we recognize that unpacking *digital life* as a framework while also centering social justice means broadening the scope of and participation in the conversation; thus our call here for diverse scholars, perspectives, and projects engaging digital life in order to open up a larger conversation, and perhaps plant the seeds for growth of future coalitions.

Possible Topics for this Special Issue

We seek original research articles that tackle questions about the literacies, skills, competencies, and/or ways of knowing needed for engagement with digital life. We are especially interested in articles that address intersections of digital life and social in/justice, and we welcome articles that approach digital life with the aim to disrupt, complicate, and/or reconceptualize theory, pedagogy, or practice around digital literacy.

We encourage interested authors to reflect on how their submissions might address the following issues and/or explore a range of topics including, but not limited to:

- How we might develop better frameworks for understanding digital life and for implementing pedagogies, praxes, and/or methodologies in our research and our classrooms that can foster the literacies/skills/competencies/ways of knowing needed for engagement with digital life
- Whether literacy is the right framework or concept for considering how to prepare students for meaningful engagement in digital life, and how else might we conceive the broad, entangled literacies, skills, and competencies needed for digital life
- How we can disrupt, complicate, and/or reconceptualize theory, pedagogy, and practice around digital literacy
- What TPC, UX, and DC can learn from and contribute to other fields in terms of digital life pedagogies, praxes, and methodologies
- How we might develop and enact socially just digital literacy/digital life pedagogy
- How we can teach the digital to varied, diverse, and nontraditional students
- Whether we can and should turn the classroom space into a space where students feel comfortable bringing in their digital lives (e.g., social media, metaverse self)

Submission Guidelines and Editorial Process

Proposals should be no more than 500 words in length (not including references) and should follow APA citation style, with a list of references at the end of the proposal. Proposals should be sent as an email attachment in .docx format to co-editors Mollie Stambler, Saveena (Chakrika) Veeramoothoo, and Katlynne Davis at CDQDigitalLife@gmail.com. All proposals should include submitter name(s), affiliation(s), and email address(es) as well as a working title for the proposed article.

Please include in your proposal the following information:
- Type of proposed article: original research (preferred) or experience report
- Connection to CFP: how does the proposal align with the overall aims of this special issue?

- Specific topic as it relates to digital life: what scholarship/methodologies/practices/frameworks would the proposed article draw on in terms of connecting to digital life/digital literacy?
- Method of discussion: how would the proposed article go about addressing this specific topic (i.e., report of empirical research, report of new process, case study of organization, discussion of emerging technology, etc.)?
- Reader takeaway: what specific knowledge would a reader of the proposed article gain by reading it? Also: what would they be able to do (i.e., structure content for reuse) after reading the proposed article?

After proposal acceptance, authors will be asked to submit full article manuscripts; importantly, acceptance of a proposal does not mean the article will automatically be accepted. Article drafts will go through a peer review process prior to final acceptance and publication.

Important: This special issue will use a roundtable peer review process wherein authors in the issue will peer review each others' submissions. Members of BDL@DLI may also serve as reviewers, as we aim to bring together experts in and around digital life and/or literacy scholarship. Authors will be asked to peer review one article for the issue (see production schedule below). It is crucial to note that we have room in the special issue for as many articles as the number of proposals we accept,and therefore acceptance of one article does not affect or increase chances that another is rejected.

Drawing from "Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors" (2021), we encourage inclusive language and citation practices that represent diverse scholarship, epistemological foundations, and ways of knowing. Co-editors are committed to ensuring a range of voices and perspectives are represented within the special issue, and to developing and implementing inclusive and equitable editorial practices within this special issue. In particular, we will disseminate the CFP through a range of channels (e.g., social media; listservs; organizations; caucuses; and field leaders) to reach a diverse set of scholars in TPC/CD. We will also provide mentoring and support for interested early career and multiply marginalized or underrepresented (MMU) scholars throughout the process.

Production Schedule

The schedule for the special issue is as follows:
May 15, 2023 – 500-word proposals due
June 15, 2023 – Guest editors return proposal decisions to submitters
November 1, 2023 – Draft manuscripts of articles (for accepted proposals) due
December 1, 2023 — Peer reviews of articles due
December 15, 2023 — Guest editors return article decisions to authors
March 1, 2024 – Final manuscripts due
June, 2024 – Publication date of special issue

Contact Information

Completed proposals or questions about either proposal topics or this special issue should be sent to co-editors Mollie Stambler, Saveena (Chakrika) Veeramoothoo, and Katlynne Davis at CDQDigitalLife@gmail.com.

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