

# Wonks and War Rooms

## S03 E09 - Mapping theories for media and digital literacy

### Episode Transcript

**Elizabeth:** [00:00:05] Welcome to [Wonks and War Rooms](#), where political communication theory meets on-the-ground strategy. I'm your host [Elizabeth Dubois](#), I'm an associate professor at the [University of Ottawa](#), and my pronouns are she/her. Today, I'm recording from the [traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin people](#).

[00:00:20] In today's episode we're wrapping up season three, which was focused on media and digital literacy. And we're going to do this a little bit differently. I don't have a guest today. Instead, it's a solo episode and I'm going to try and run through the different ideas, theories, concepts we talked about this season and kind of map the relationships between them. We're going to talk about those key points, how they fit with some of the other episodes from Wonks and War Rooms in previous seasons, and how they're going to lead to next season, which will be beginning in February on mis- and disinformation. As always, we've got show notes for you and a full transcript in both English and French over at [PolCommTech.ca](#). On the website, I'm also adding an image of a concept map I created to help me think about how these theories all fit together. All right, let's dive in.

[00:01:10] So this season was all about media and digital literacy, and there are a lot of ways to define these terms. But in [episode one](#), with [Matthew](#) from [MediaSmarts](#), we talked about a couple of the basics. For me, [digital literacy](#) and [media literacy](#) are essentially about the skills and competencies one needs to engage with news media content and to really understand how and why it was created.

[00:01:33] Digital literacy goes beyond media literacy and looks at the skills and competencies needed to use and understand specific digital tools like social media and search engines. What I care most about is whether or not people understand \*why\* certain information shows up on their screens, and I find it helpful to think about media

and digital literacy in terms of functional literacy and critical literacy. On the functional side, it's things like: Do you know how to use news websites? Download a podcast? Use a search engine? Share a link? And so on. And [on the critical side](#), it's things like: Can you critically reflect on why a journalist chose the title they chose? Why one story showed up on your feed, but not on your friend's feed? Why super emotional stories seem to show up more than those basic straight facts stories.

[00:02:21] Developing media and digital literacy requires a lot of time and energy, and it requires individuals to be actively thinking about their wider information environment: the [digital media ecosystem](#). I like to use two overarching theories to help me think about that wider information environment, that digital media ecosystem. The first is this idea of hybridity. In a [hybrid media system](#), a variety of actors all use a collection of tools and tactics to access and share information. So journalists, politicians, and people like you and I might all have Twitter accounts where we can follow others and post our own thoughts and ideas. That puts us a little bit on a level playing field [because] we're sharing tools and tactics. Whereas in a broadcast media system, you needed access to a printing press or a radio station to be able to get your ideas out. And so there was a difference in the kinds of power imbalances that existed.

[00:03:16] Now we don't have a Wonks and War Rooms episode on hybridity yet, but I'm linking in the show notes to a short video which does a really great job of diving into that concept and explaining it in more detail.

[00:03:27] We do have an episode on the idea of assemblages, however. So that's [season one, episode two](#), and it is with lawyer [Naomi Sayers](#). In that episode, we talk about how [assemblages](#) are these collections of people and tools and their relationships, and we talk about how the collection of these people actually helps us better understand who exists in an information environment and how they might have power relative to each other.

[00:03:55] The next overarching theory that I like is this idea of a high choice media environment where there are lots of options for how to access and how to share information. We can pick and choose the best information that's suited to our needs,

and that's information that we might pick based on the [channel of communication](#), based on the source of communication, or some other aspects—that's up to us. You can check out [season one, episode one](#), where journalist [Jane Lytvynenko](#) and I dive deep into [high choice media systems](#).

[00:04:24] So against this backdrop, I want to point to three main kinds of actors that I think are essential for media and digital literacy. These are: news media, tech companies, and you! Well, us. People—people making choices.

[00:04:40] So let's start with those choices that we as individuals make. So we have to make choices about what information to consume, what to ignore, what to interpret, and how. We have to pick which channels of communication we want to use. We have to pick who we want to trust. We have to pick if we want to get a second opinion or do any fact-checking. And so, this season, we started to take a small little peek at some of those choices. And [to do this] we started with the idea of [political information repertoires](#). In [episode two](#) I chatted with journalist [Murad Hemmadi](#), and we talked about how each of us develop our own set of options for drawing in political information. Each of us has our own individual repertoire, which is essentially our own specific set of sources and channels of information. This collection helps shape, and is also shaped by, our level of knowledge and skills—our media and digital literacy. Murad and I talked about the connection between one's political information repertoires and political engagement, and although we didn't have time to dive deeply into the idea, we did take a little bit of time to talk about some kinds of online activism and how that fits in with those larger repertoires.

[00:05:49] In [episode three](#) I chatted with journalist [Jen Gerson](#), and we talked about the idea of [selective avoidance](#), which is connected to the idea of [selective exposure](#). Both of these ideas are, at their base, about making choices of what specifically to include or exclude from your political information repertoire. These are concepts that help us understand how people deal with the huge amount of information that's available to all of us. And the idea of intentional selection is really important because that intentionality is, well, ideally pretty tied to your media and digital literacy. There are a lot of ways making choices play out. For example, news media may start thinking about how to

[create content, knowing that their readers—their audiences—are being selective](#). And that's something that Jen and I discuss in the episode and quite a lot of detail.

[00:06:40] Now, beyond the selection of specific information, we also make choices about what information we encounter through the social groups we join and the spaces we participate in. In [episode four](#), [Erin Gee](#), who's co-host of the [Bad + Bitchy Podcast](#) (if you haven't listened to that, you definitely should), [and I] chat about safe spaces. The idea of safe spaces [comes from feminist theory](#) and describes sites where marginalized individuals can come together as a group and speak freely. They can discuss their shared experiences with other members of that group, and they can do this away from others [who] might pose a threat to them. These spaces can sometimes be used to challenge oppression and organize for social change.

[00:07:20] Now, there's a lot of other ways social groups impact your access to political information and ideas—we don't have time to go through all of them—but one is, if you head back to [season one, episode four](#), the idea of the [two-step flow hypothesis](#), which I talked about with campaigner and political strategist [Nick Switalski](#). We talked about how this theory basically suggests that news media aren't directly impacting the general public, but instead people's friends and family and everyday associates are kind of interpreters of the information from news media, and that interpretation is what ultimately leads to political opinion change. And that is a perfect segue into talking about the next major actor: news media.

[00:08:04] The two-step flow hypothesis is what we call a [media effects theory](#). Now, media effects theories in political communication research are just a collection of theories that are about the news media's effects or influence or impact on the general public. Some of the other key theories are [agenda setting](#) and gatekeeping. You can check out [season one, episode three](#), with journalist [Fatima Syed](#) for more on [gatekeeping](#). In [season two, episode eight](#), I also chatted with journalist [Sherry Aske](#) about the idea of a [networked fourth estate](#), which helps paint a picture of how news media fit into the wider digital ecosystem.

[00:08:42] But, beyond these kinds of processes that journalists and journalistic institutions are part of, the actual content also matters quite a lot. And that's because different kinds of content require different types of media literacy and different standards for assessing that content. So next season, as I mentioned, we're diving into [mis- and disinformation](#), and we're going to talk a lot about different types of content and how that content spreads through our digital ecosystem. But before we do that, [in season \[three\], we wanted to tackle the larger idea of political satire](#), which [sometimes gets confused with mis- and disinformation](#). [Political satire](#), as discussed with [Tim Fontaine](#), who is a former journalist and current creator and editor of the satirical site [Walking Eagle News](#), is a form of social criticism that uses humour as a way to diminish a subject like a politician or a system. Political satire, in particular, is used as a way to highlight gaps in dominant discourse in a way that is more accessible to the public and, though it doesn't have to be, often can be a tool for advocacy. So, what's important here about political satire is that it is this established form of political information sharing. It often [\[exaggerates\]](#) and draws humour and pushes the norms of journalistic content beyond expectations of clear objectivity. It's not necessarily fact-based, although at [\[its\]](#) foundations there is usually some level of truth, as Tim Fontaine discussed in the episode.

[00:10:15] Finally, we end the season with a peek into the role of tech companies. Next season, we're going to be diving into ideas like [polarization](#) and the technical setup that allows [mis- and disinformation to flow online](#). But in this season, we wanted to set the groundwork. So in [episode six](#), I chatted with [Andrew Strait](#) [who is] a former content moderator at Google. He and I chatted about how content moderation works in big tech companies. We talked about the people involved, the lack of transparency in how it's done, and how important the very design of platforms and their algorithms for filtering information is.

[00:10:48] We introduced the idea of [technological affordances](#), which journalist [Rachel Aiello](#) and I talked about in detail in the next episode ([episode seven](#)). Now, the term affordances refers to what an object allows someone to do. In the context of technology, it refers to the features that different technologies possess that enable or limit a user's actions. So, Twitter's character limit, for example. Rachel talked a lot about how the affordances of a mobile phone impact what she does as a journalist, from reporting to producing news stories across a wide range of platforms. Our chat really underscores

how digital literacy is key for understanding technological affordances and making the most of them.

[00:11:32] And then in [episode eight](#), we zoom out to a broader theory: the idea of [surveillance capitalism](#). I chatted with public policy expert [Vass Bednar](#) to talk about the ways in which companies collect data about us for profit. The data is often gathered and analyzed (sometimes by AI) and used mostly as a way to predict future behaviour, which is then used to guide things like advertisements or changes to the very technology itself. This is important because understanding the motivation behind how tech companies design their business and their tools can help us understand why some content shows up on our screens and other content doesn't. Surveillance capitalism is just one of a bunch of ways to think about what motivates tech companies and how tech companies have wider social, political, and economic impacts.

[00:12:18] So next season, we're going to investigate a few other ways [that technology impacts us socially, politically, and economically]. We're going to think about mis- and disinformation, how it flows, and look at cases like responses to government regulation around harassment and hate speech online, or responses to the COVID 19 pandemic and issues with disinformation about masks or vaccines.

[00:12:38] Overall, my hope is that this season has helped you think about media and digital literacy ~broadly~ and that, by this point, you see that a lot of different actors, tools of communication, and relationships between them impact the political information we have access to and that we share. This season is by no means exhaustive, but we have managed to cover quite a lot with these eight key theories. Next season will be back with eight more theories to help pick apart and understand mis- and disinformation in the digital media ecosystem.

[00:13:10] So if you've got guest ideas or topics, questions, comments, [or] other kinds of feedback, feel free to reach out. You can find more about the podcast at [PolCommTech.ca](#), you can find my lab on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#) @polcommtech, and you can find me on Twitter [@lizdubois](#). Once again, we've got transcripts available for this entire season in both English and French available at [PolCommTech.ca](#), and we've

got show notes for this and all episodes of Wonks and War Rooms available wherever you get your podcasts. If you haven't already, please go ahead and like and rate and subscribe. It makes a big difference in the discoverability of our podcast and really helps make sure that others can find and enjoy this content too.

[00:13:56] Lastly, if you use this podcast in your work in some way, we would love to hear about it. It really helps us understand what the reach of this podcast is and how people are making use of it. So again, you can find us on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) (@polcommtech or [@lizduois](#)) and you can find a contact form at the [PolCommTech.ca](#) website.

[00:14:18] Thanks so much for a great season and see you in the new year.

[00:14:25] This special season on media and digital literacy is funded in part through a Connections grant from the [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada](#) and the [Digital Citizen Initiative](#).