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*Multimodale Impulse aus dem Projekt  
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# 12. Linguistic Literacy and Political Communication in the Digital Age

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## Abstract

Digitalization is a ubiquitous phenomenon and dealing with it responsibly requires specific knowledge, competences and skills in a variety of areas. Digital literacy is often defined as a central element of digital education. This article explores what the concept entails, defines linguistic literacy as a core component and applies it specifically to (digital) political communication.

## 1. Introduction: Digital Education and Digital Literacies

Digitalization is a ubiquitous phenomenon, and it has been repeatedly pointed out, not least in the education sector, that

dealing with it responsibly requires special knowledge, competences and skills in a wide variety of areas (e. g., Pollak et al., 2019; Narr & Friedrich, 2021). The importance given to digital education is reflected in EU policies such as the “Digital Education Action Plan (2021–2027)” which aims to enhance “high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe, and [...] to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of Member States to the digital age” (EC, 2022a). This is to be realized through, among other things, “[c]ommon guidelines for teachers and educators to foster digital literacy and tackle disinformation through education and training.” Digital literacy is thus defined as a core element of digital education. But what do these two concepts entail?

## 1.1 Digital Education

In his overview of different uses of ‘digital education,’ Lengsfeld (2019) distinguishes between a general (1), comprehensive (2), narrow (3) and instrumental (4) understanding:

“In a general sense, the term ‘digital education’ is understood as ‘education’ in the digital age, referring to all nuances of meaning of the concept of education” (1). It can be criticized that this definition is tautological and does not elaborate on the components of the definiendum. The comprehensive definition (2) of the term is more explicit. It encompasses

the formation of a person in the sense of a comprehensive and holistic spiritual, physical, social and cultural development into a reflected personality who is aware of all facets of his or her being as a human being in a digital world and is able to draw conclusions for the shaping of his or her life in the digital age based on this (Lengsfeld, 2019).



Apart from these two broad understandings of digital education, the narrow approach (3) refers to it

in a material sense to describe all the knowledge, skills and competences relating to digital information and communication technologies and the implications of their proliferation. The term 'digital education' in this concept refers both to the process of competence transfer and to the state achieved as a result (Lengsfeld, 2019).

An instrumental use (4) of the term "refers to a process of education that is supported, made possible or shaped by the use of digital information and communication technologies" (ibid.).

While all of these definitions contain tautological components that require more precise elaborations, they give an idea of the approaches that are grouped under the term 'digital education.' What they all have in common is that they ultimately aim to enable individuals to (better) manage environments that are based on or influenced by digital technology. The comprehensive view (2) can be seen as encompassing the skills and competences referred to in the understandings (3) and (4) of the term.

## 1.2 Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is closely related to media competence models in that they both aim to enhance individuals' knowledge, competences, and skills for a mediatized world (e. g., Narr & Friedrich, 2021). Belshaw (2012, p. 206) defines eight "essential elements of digital literacies" that are still widely used: (1) "Cultural," (2) "Cognitive," (3) "Constructive," (4) "Communicative," (5) "Confident," (6) "Creative," (7) "Critical,"

and (8) “Civic.” Only selected aspects of digital literacies that these keywords relate to can be highlighted here. Thus, the *cultural* component (1) emphasizes that, in order to be digitally literate, one needs to understand the specifics of a digital context:

In each of these [digital] contexts are found different codes and ways of operating, things that are accepted and encouraged as well as those that are frowned upon and rejected. [...] Digital literacies are not solely about technical proficiency but about the issues, norms and habits of mind surrounding [...] technologies used for a particular purpose (p. 207).

Belshaw (2012) recommends promoting this component of digital literacy

through immersion in a range of digital environments [...] given that educational institutions are tasked with preparing young people for an uncertain future, they should expose them to the widest range of semiotic domains possible. [...] The [c]ultural element of digital literacies is all about seeking ways to give people additional ‘lenses’ through which to see the world (ibid.).

Closely related to this is the *cognitive* element of digital literacies (2) that can be briefly described as the “‘mind-expansion’ [that] comes through the co-creation and contextualization of digital literacies, not through attempting to impose an ‘objective’ definition” (p. 208).

Belshaw (2012) suggests that this literacy “can be developed” by focusing “upon a variety of mental models and lenses. [...] We should encourage those in whom we seek to develop digital literacies to see nuance where they have previously seen only dichotomy” (ibid.).

The *constructive* element (3) refers to “creating something

new, including using and remixing content from other sources to create something original” (Belshaw, 2012, p. 208-209). Closely related to this is the *creative* element (6). In this model, it refers to “doing new things in new ways,” which is particularly related to trying out new technological means (p. 212). The *communicative* component (4) is seen as “in essence, the nuts and bolts of how to communicate in digital networked environments,” and “understanding how communications media work” (p. 209). Belshaw (2012) sees it as “closely allied to the [c]ritical element of digital literacies [7] but [...] much more concerned with reproducing the forms themselves rather than deconstructing how they work” (p. 210). He defines the *critical* element (7) as essentially involving a “reflection upon literacy practices in various semiotic domains. Who is excluded? What are the power structures and assumptions behind such literacy practices?” (p. 213). *Confidence* (5) relates to approaching digital environments positively, without timidity or fear of experimentation, and using them for problem solving (p. 211). The *civic* element of digital literacies (8), finally, refers to the development of people’s abilities to “use digital environments” “to support the development of Civil Society” and to “self-organise into social movements” (p. 213). The “disruptive power of online social networks” (p. 214) is also mentioned in this context, which refers back to the critical element (7) in particular. Belshaw (2012, p. 214) sees his elements of digital literacy as an “overlapping matrix [...] that may be customised and used to help people develop attributes, skills and attitudes.”

The European Commission’s “Digital Competence Framework” (EC, 2022b), for example, is one of many current approaches that can be summarized under the concept of ‘digital literacy’ (e. g., Ilomäki, Kantosalo & Lakkala, 2011) and that tie in with fundamental approaches to digital literacy, such as those discussed above by Belshaw (2012). The framework specifies and defines core areas that should be considered to

improve people's competence in digital environments. One of them is “[i]nformation and data literacy” which includes, for example, “[e]valuating data, information and digital content,” the ability to “interact through a variety of digital technologies and to understand appropriate digital communication means for a given context,” and “[t]o adapt communication strategies to the specific audience and to be aware of cultural and generational diversity in digital environments” (EC, 2022b, cf. website for more details).

Our interdisciplinary project SKILL.de<sup>1</sup> is based on an integrative, comprehensive approach to digital education as outlined in 1.1 and relates to essential components of digital literacies as presented above.

## 2. Information & Media Literacy and Linguistic Literacy

The various disciplines that have contributed to SKILL.de have defined *Information and Media Literacy* (IML) as a core element of digital education with essential components of digital literacy. The improvement of students' IML has been the focus of research in this project, as well as its application in the form of the development of educational content that serves this purpose. Pollak et al. (2019) provide an extensive overview of the basic understanding of IML in the context of the project. Some important statements are that IML is essentially media education (“*Medienbildung*”) and not just the acquisition of

1. Das Projekt SKILL.de wird im Rahmen der gemeinsamen „Qualitätsoffensive Lehrerbildung“ von Bund und Ländern mit Mitteln des Bundesministeriums für Bildung und Forschung unter dem Förderkennzeichen 01JA1924 gefördert.

media competence (“*Medienkompetenzerwerb*”) (Pollak et al., 2019, p. 88). At the core of IML lies mediality, i. e. all perceptions, interactions, and interpretations of the world are conveyed through media (Pollak et al., 2019, p. 91). Media here can include both analog and digital (technical) media, but also the human sensory organs through which our perceptions of the world are filtered and interpreted (cf., e. g., Wawra, 2010). Historicity, culturality, and constructivity are particularly emphasized and seen as constitutive of mediality. Digitalization is understood as a currently achieved form of mediatization (Pollak et al., 2019, p. 91, for more details). This is not to deny that there are still other, non-digital forms of mediatization, digitalization is only technologically the latest.

While Pollak et al. (2019) explicitly cite historicity, culturality, and constructivity as constitutive of mediality, historicity and culturality could also be subsumed under constructivity in the following sense: Meaning is constructed through signs – be they iconic, indexical, or symbolic. Their selection, combination, and interpretation is always culturally embedded, and this includes a historical dimension. Deviations from conventions are of course possible and carry their own message. Understanding any form of communication as mediated and constructed in this sense – both on the production and reception side – and being able to produce and interpret any form of communication accordingly would therefore be characteristic of IML. The linguistic (as a symbolic) sign (spoken or written) is often the key element of meaning construction. This is not to say that it is always needed, and we all know about the communicative power that images alone can have, for example. Furthermore, different types of signs (iconic, indexical, symbolic) can also be combined in a multimodal communication product. Ever since humans developed speech, however, being able to use and interpret linguistic signs has always been a necessary condition for participating in collectives or cultures. Therefore, *Linguistic Literacy* (LL) is

emphasized here as *the* most fundamental and essential component of IML. Without LL, the overall goals of IML cannot be achieved. LL encompasses not only linguistic knowledge, i. e. the ability to speak and write a language (grammatical and lexical knowledge) and to use it adequately in a culture (pragmatic knowledge). LL is more: On the reception side, it encompasses the ability to deconstruct language-based communication, and to evaluate it critically. This deconstruction of meaning includes taking into account the specifics of the analog or digital mediality of communication (cf. the corresponding component in the IML concept). On the production side, it includes the ability to construct meaning purposefully on the basis of linguistic signs for specific analog or digital contexts. The construction and deconstruction of meaning (cf. the dimension of constructivity in the IML concept) includes the contextualization of meaning, which encompasses historicity and culturality of the IML concept (see above). Because of its central place in digital education, LL has therefore been the focus of our subproject – “Political Communication in the Digital Age” – within SKILL.de. Before going into more detail in chapter 4., chapter 3. outlines why political communication was chosen as the focus of our endeavor to develop students’ IML and (digital) LL.

## **3. Digitalization, Linguistic Literacy and Political Education**

### **3.1 The Relevance of Political Education in the Digital Age**

The political domain was chosen as a study area for our subproject because it is an important area in which individuals

should be linguistically literate – both in analog and digital contexts. Political or civic education comprises “all consciously planned and organised, continuous and targeted measures by educational institutions to equip young people and adults with the prerequisites necessary to participate in political and social life”<sup>2</sup> (Massing, 2022 after Andersen & Woyke, 2021).

Digital media have become an integral part of political life and must therefore be included in political education. In their joint publication on digitalization and democracy, German national academies of sciences and humanities<sup>3</sup> (NA, 2021) state the positive and negative sides of “new, digital communication formats such as online media and social networks.”<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, they “have raised great expectations with regard to their democratization potential [...]: Easier access to information for citizens and more opportunities for political participation and the strengthening of civil society” (NA, 2021, p. 4). On the other hand, they “have also favored critical developments [...] [such as] an increase in misinformation, attempts at manipulation and hate speech”<sup>5</sup> (NA, 2021, p. 4).

Narr & Friedrich (2021) go more into detail and outline the relevance of political education in our digital age as follows:

At the latest with the Brexit referendum and the US presidential elections in 2016 and 2020, but also as early as 2008 with the election of Barack Obama to the White

2. my translation.
3. The statement was published by the Nationale Akademie der Wissenschaften Leopoldina, the Union der deutschen Akademien der Wissenschaften, and acatech – Deutsche Akademie der Technikwissenschaften.
4. My translation.
5. My translations.

House, the realization that the internet and platforms such as Facebook or Twitter have a significant impact on 'real life' has also become established in print, radio and television. Discourse, impact, the formation of opinion and will now also take place online and have a real impact on the world of elections, votes and parliaments. Accordingly, education that aims to prepare people for participation in political and social life must necessarily provide for corresponding concepts<sup>6</sup> (Narr & Friedrich, 2021).

The importance of digital political education (including raising awareness of negative forms of digital political communication) is further underlined by studies such as that of Demata (2016), for example. It analyzes the use of language on the White House Facebook page (during President Obama's State of the Union address in 2014). The study concludes that "most comments lack coherence and relevance and no constructive dialogue can be built, as many comments consist in insults." There is a "deep ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans, broadly coincident with Pro-Obama and Anti-Obama users" and "[t]he resulting picture is that of an 'argument culture' in which failure in social communication seems to be the most distinctive feature" (Demata, 2016).

Along the same lines, Haidt (2022) criticizes how social media in particular has "brought injustice – and political dysfunction – in three ways:" (1) "more power [is given] to trolls and provocateurs while silencing good citizens," "being online [...] allowed a small number of aggressive people to attack a much larger set of victims," (2) "social media give more power and

## 6. My translation.



voice to the political extremes while reducing the power and voice of the moderate majority,” (p. 59) and (3)

social media deputizes everyone to administer justice with no due process. Platforms like Twitter devolve into the Wild West, with no accountability for vigilantes. A successful attack attracts a barrage of likes and follow-on strikes. Enhanced-virality platforms thereby facilitate massive collective punishment for small or imagined offenses, with real-world consequences, including innocent people losing their jobs and being shamed into suicide (p. 60).

Such “mob dynamics,” the author criticizes, result in “a society that ignores context, proportionality, mercy, and truth” (Haidt, 2022, p. 60). He identifies the introduction of “like” and “share” buttons on social media platforms since 2009 as a major trigger of these negative developments, as they intensified “viral dynamics” (p. 57).

Articles such as Haidt’s (2022) can be a good starting point for a discussion on the role of digital media in our society, thereby developing parts of students’ digital literacy as outlined above. In general, political communication is a valuable area of study for the development of IML, including LL, as it is

a complex [...] activity in which language and symbols, employed by leaders, media, citizens, and citizen groups, exert a multitude of effects on individuals and society, as well as on outcomes that bear on the public policy of a nation, state, or community (Perloff, 2022, p. 44).

Political communication is “fundamentally a mediated experience,” and “[o]perates on a worldwide basis, with commonalities across borders, and differences as a function of a country’s economic and political structures” (ibid., p. 47).

What people “learn from media,” depends on what they know about them, their information processing and construction of events (p. 140). More specifically, it depends on their IML, including particularly their LL, which contributes essentially to people's ability to participate in political discourse as critical and informed citizens.

### **3.2 Political Education for the Promotion of Democracy**

The Council of Europe (CE, 2019) has published a handbook on what education should entail in order to promote a democratic culture in Europe. Digital contexts are given special consideration, and a “digital citizen” is envisaged:

A digital citizen is someone who, through the development of a broad range of competences, is able to actively, positively and responsibly engage in both on- and offline communities, whether local, national or global. As digital technologies are disruptive in nature and constantly evolving, competence building is a lifelong process that should begin from earliest childhood at home and at school, in formal, informal and non-formal educational settings. [...] Competent digital citizens are able to respond to new and everyday challenges related to learning, work, employability, leisure, inclusion and participation in society, respecting human rights and intercultural difference (CE, 2019, pp. 11–12).

This definition is very broad and not very concrete: What competences are needed to participate ‘actively,’ ‘positively’ and ‘responsibly,’ at local, national or global level, ‘on-’ as well as ‘offline,’ or to participate in all areas of social life? The Council

of Europe (CE, 2019, p. 12) further specifies “competences for democratic culture,” which comprise (1) “**Values**” (“human dignity and human rights,” “cultural diversity,” “democracy, justice, fairness, equality, and the rule of law”), (2) “**Attitudes**” (“Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices,” “Respect,” “Civic-mindedness,” “Responsibility,” “Self-efficacy,” “Tolerance of ambiguity”), (3) “**Skills**” (“Autonomous learning skills,” “Analytical and critical thinking skills,” “Skills of listening and observing,” “Empathy,” “Flexibility and adaptability,” “Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills,” “Co-operation skills,” “Conflict-resolution skills,” and (4) “**Knowledge and critical understanding**” (“... of the self,” “... of language and communication,” “the world: politics, [...], culture, cultures, [...], media, [...].” (p. 12)

Our subproject relates to these competences and promotes them through teaching methods and content, with a special focus on “[l]inguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills” as well as on the “[k]nowledge and critical understanding of language and communication,” “politics” (here: political discourse) and (political) “culture” as well as (Anglo-American) “cultures”, and (digital) “media.” The seminars developed in our subproject are anchored in digital education and literacy development (cf. 1., 2.), and aim at a competent, critical, reflective and culturally sensitive approach to digitally mediated political communication. This also includes an intensive examination of the potentials and dangers of digitally mediated political communication for (grassroots) democratic processes.

# 4. Linguistic Literacy in (Digital) Political Communication: Research and Seminar Development

## 4.1 Overview

Our research and seminar development in the subproject “Political Communication in the Digital Age” focuses on the analysis, critical discussion and reflection of political communication in digital environments, the guidance and support of students in developing their own communication products for digital environments using digital tools, and the development of teaching and learning methods that integrate innovative digital tools and platforms (see Holze & Zitzelsberger, 2022; Holze, 2023; Knapp & Holze, 2023; cf. also Wawra, 2018a; Wawra, 2023). The aim was thus to promote students’ LL as well as key elements of their digital literacies and competences for a democratic culture as described in the previous chapters.

Teaching modules (“*Unterrichtsbausteine*”) and Open Educational Resources (OER) have been created for use in school and university contexts. These contribute to professional networking and provide knowledge, competences and skills to promote particularly LL in (digital political) communication. The seminars also include some subject content prescribed by the Bavarian Teachers’ Examination Regulations I (LPO I), so that these can be linked to the acquisition of competences and skills for teaching and learning in the digital age. Our main goal is to contribute to enabling informed linguistic, media and culture-sensitive discussions and critical reflections in university and school settings. This will contribute to the overall project goal of SKILL.de, namely the development of critical (digital) media competence which enables students to

critically reflect on (digital) media, empowers them to use (digital) media appropriately and to produce (digital) media themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Basic approaches that we used in our research and seminar development for the promotion of students' LL – in analog and digital contexts – are mainly methods and frameworks of (Multimodal) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (e. g., Wawra, 2018a), as well as discourse-based and pragmatic-stylistic approaches to Public Relations (Wawra, 2018b, c). The latter include a first approach to digital communication that can be used in the classroom, using Lasswell's (1964) formula and adapting it to the context of public relations in general and to our context of political communication in digital environments in particular. This involves an extension of Lasswell's (1964) original formula, especially by the question 'How?', which relates to the linguistic means (possibly in conjunction with other semiotic modes such as images or gestures) used to construct meaning and which are particularly relevant for the development of LL.

The formula that can then be used as a basic approach for the analysis of digital political communication (in the classroom) reads in the new version: 'Who says what in which context, with what intention (for what purpose), when (historicity), to whom, through which (digital) communication channel (mediality), how and to what effect?' The 'how' of communication to be analyzed with students can include a wide range of pragmatic and stylistic means, for instance, from text design, framing, presuppositions and implicatures, saliencies on all linguistic levels, nominalizations ("to conceal agents, simplify complex processes and delete time and place" (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 222)) and overlexicalizations to

7. cf. <https://www.skill.uni-passau.de/was-macht-skillde/> (last access: 07/21/2021).

rhetorical devices and tropes such as metaphors (cf. e. g., Gee, 2014; Machin & Mayr, 2012; Perloff, 2022; Statham, 2022, which are well suited as readings for the theoretical foundation of seminars) (see Wawra, 2018b, c for more detailed elaborations and a systematic outline of approaches to the development of LL based on critical discourse, stylistic and pragmatic analyses).

## 4.2 SKILL.de Focus Seminars

The seminars that were specifically developed for SKILL.de featured the following topics:

- Political communication on Twitter
- Discourses of social movements on digital platforms
- Crisis communication via social media
- Framing and metaphors in (digital) political communication
- Application of corpus linguistics as a method for cross-cultural comparative analyses of (digital) political communication (e. g., in the U.S., the U.K., and New Zealand)
- IML in the foreign language classroom
- IML digital learning games

In particular, the following seminar documentations and online materials (by Regina Holze, where indicated in cooperation with other disciplines) are available online:<sup>8</sup>

- Pragmatics in Politics: Crisis Framing (integration of

8. see <https://blog.dilab.uni-passau.de/seminardokumentationen/>, and <https://blog.dilab.uni-passau.de/beitraege/> (last access: 09/27/2022).

SKILL.de OER-material from other disciplines)

- Pragmatics in Politics: Crisis Communication in the Covid-19 Pandemic (online teaching format with blended learning, including analyses and recommendations for government communications by students)
- Covid-19 and its Metaphors (with a special focus on Covid-19 metaphors in digital political communication and video essay productions by students) (with Florian Zitzelsberger)
- #Activism and Social Media Movements: Political Communication in the Digital Age (including Hashtag-analyses by students with MAXQDA) (with Florian Zitzelsberger)
- Learning by Playing: Development and Design of Learning Games for Information and Media Literacy (including learning games such as a Pen and Paper and Escape Game (with Dorothe Knapp)
- The Vase: Ein Detektivspiel zum Thema Framing (with Dorothe Knapp)<sup>9</sup>
- Studierendenprodukte als Prüfungsleistung: Erfahrungen aus dem interdisziplinären Seminar 'COVID-19 and Its Metaphors' (with Florian Zitzelsberger)
- Podcast Mit&Über 8: COVID-19 and its Metaphors. Ein Kooperationsseminar aus dem Teilvorhaben Political Communication in the Digital Age (Host Dorothe Knapp, Production Anna Sophia Boxleitner and Dorothe Knapp)<sup>10</sup>
- Learning Stations Corpus Linguistics, Virtuelle Hochschule Bayern (smartVHB)<sup>11</sup>

9. <https://blog.dilab.uni-passau.de/the-vase-ein-detektivspiel-zum-thema-framing>

10. <https://open.spotify.com/show/5yO2Z4Gm9CYwGyYLI8mpRm>  
(last access: 09/28/2022).

11. <https://smart.vhb.org/edu-sharing/components/render/001f99ba-de40-4997-ba8d-1d8ccf0d6dd3/> (last access: 09/28/

- Unterrichtsbaustein VerLINKt – Spielend Zusammenhänge Erkennen<sup>12</sup>
- Learning Stations Corpus Linguistics: Political Communication, Virtuelle Hochschule Bayern (smartVHB)<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Conclusion and Outlook

“A democracy can’t be strong if its citizenship is weak” (Galston, 2011). It has been shown that the development of a solid IML and LL is an essential prerequisite for strong citizenship in our digital age, which is all the more important in times when democracies face serious threats from within and without. As Perloff (2022) states:

Societies with diverse electoral and political structures educate and socialize citizens, introducing them to their country’s foundational political values and norms. [...] Children, adolescents, and young adults are not born with an appreciation for democratic values, and society needs to cultivate these ideas (p. 169).

Here, the education sector also has a large and important task to fulfil, which comes with great responsibility. IML and LL can heighten people’s awareness of the opportunities and risks of

2022).

12. <https://blog.dilab.uni-passau.de/unterrichtsbausteine/unterrichtsbaustein-verlinkt-spielend-zusammenhaenge-erkennen/>
13. <https://oer.vhb.org/edu-sharing/components/render/1e667aed-9273-449d-868b-1f127e02ed03/>



communication in digital media contexts and of the constructed nature of any message and the resulting agendas:

Over the many decades, researchers have documented a multitude of political communication effects, such as agenda-setting, priming, and framing, that result from cognitive processing of electoral messages. [...] There continue to be lively debates about whether political media exert strong or modest impacts, the nature of the processes that mediate communication effects, the extent to which messages inform or obfuscate issues, and the degree to which new media are unraveling democratic processes or contributing to their revitalization (Perlon, 2022, p. 118).

Political communication in the digital age remains a vital and important field of research and teaching that can make a positive contribution to the future development of societies.

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