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The Platform Assemblage Model: A New Framework for Media and Information Literacy Education

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Abstract

Contemporary media and information literacy (MIL) education faces a fundamental challenge: its analytical tools remain rooted in concepts like "text," "author," and "audience" inherited from print culture, while the media environment has transformed into a complex ecosystem of platforms, algorithms, and participatory networks. This article proposes a new theoretical framework for MIL education based on the concept of the Platform Assemblage. Drawing on assemblage theory (DeLanda), actor-network theory (Latour), and critical platform studies (van Dijck, Gillespie), we argue that media phenomena are not discrete texts but dynamic gatherings of heterogeneous actors – human and non-human, including algorithms, interfaces, legal codes, and user communities. We articulate five dimensions for analyzing any platform-based media formation: (1) neuro-mimetic resonance (how platforms engineer collective affect); (2) quasi-biological replication (memetic evolution under algorithmic pressure); (3) chronophagy (the capture of attention as economic driver); (4) the dark matter of the latent (the generative power of the unseen); and (5) algorithmic co-agency (non-human actors as co-creators). The article demonstrates how each dimension translates into specific competencies for MIL education, enabling learners to move beyond content analysis to infrastructure critique. We conclude by proposing a pedagogical shift from hermeneutics to cartography: teaching students to map platform assemblages rather than merely interpret media messages. This framework equips educators with conceptual tools for fostering critical agency in platform-saturated environments.

Keywords: media literacy, information literacy, platform studies, assemblage theory, algorithmic literacy, digital education, critical pedagogy, attention economy

1. Introduction

Media and information literacy (MIL) has long been recognized as an essential competency for democratic citizenship in the digital age. UNESCO's MIL framework emphasizes the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content across various forms and contexts (Wilson et al., 2011). Traditional MIL education has focused on developing critical skills for interpreting media messages: identifying bias, evaluating sources, understanding authorship, and recognizing persuasive techniques (Buckingham, 2007; Potter, 2019; Tinák, Gálik, 2026). These competencies remain necessary, but they are no longer sufficient. Recent scholarship has begun to reconceptualize media literacy for the platform environment. Cho et al. (Cho et al., 2024) have proposed a comprehensive framework for social media literacy that shifts attention from individual messages to the distinctive affordances and dynamics of social media platforms. However, even this expanded framework remains primarily focused on user competencies – what individuals need to know and do to navigate

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social media effectively. In our previous work (Markov, Shtayn, 2026), we introduced the concept of "second-order media literacy" to describe the capacity to understand not just media content but the historical and semantic conditions under which media become legible. The present article extends this line of inquiry by proposing that genuine media literacy for the platform age requires a shift from analyzing what users do to analyzing the assemblages within which users act.

The media environment that contemporary learners inhabit is fundamentally different from the one for which traditional MIL frameworks were designed. It is no longer organized primarily around discrete texts produced by identifiable authors and distributed through predictable channels. Instead, it is composed of dynamic, platform-based ecosystems in which content is continuously generated, algorithmically curated, and collectively transformed by distributed networks of human and non-human actors. A teenager scrolling through TikTok is not simply "consuming content"; they are navigating an assemblage that includes the platform's recommendation algorithm, its interface design, its data extraction infrastructure, the affective labor of countless creators, and the participatory practices of commenters and remixers (Zulli, 2020). The "message" they encounter is not a fixed text but a temporary stabilization of this entire network.

This transformation poses a profound challenge for MIL education. The conceptual tools we provide to learners – author, text, audience, bias, source – were developed for a media regime that is rapidly receding. They capture only the visible surface of platform-based media, leaving the underlying infrastructures and processes invisible and therefore unchallengeable. As Gillespie (Gillespie, 2018) has argued, platforms are not neutral intermediaries but "custodians of the internet" whose algorithms, policies, and architectures actively shape public discourse. If MIL education does not equip learners to understand and critique these infrastructural dimensions, it risks producing citizens who can interpret media messages but cannot grasp the forces that determine which messages reach them in the first place.

This article proposes a new theoretical framework for MIL education based on the concept of the Platform Assemblage. Drawing on assemblage theory (DeLanda, 2006; DeLanda, 2016), actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), and critical platform studies (Gillespie, 2014; Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck, 2013), we reconceive platform-based media phenomena as dynamic gatherings of heterogeneous actors whose interactions produce cultural effects. We articulate five dimensions for analyzing any Platform Assemblage and demonstrate how each dimension translates into specific competencies for MIL education. Our goal is to equip educators with a conceptual vocabulary for teaching what we call infrastructural literacy: the ability to understand, navigate, and critically engage with the platforms and algorithms that increasingly mediate public life.

2. Materials and methods

The main sources for this article are drawn from three intersecting fields of research. First, we draw on assemblage theory as developed by Manuel DeLanda (DeLanda, 2006; DeLanda, 2016) and actor-network theory as formulated by Bruno Latour (Latour, 2005), which provide the ontological foundations for understanding media phenomena as distributed networks rather than discrete objects. Second, we engage with critical platform studies, including the work of van Dijck (van Dijck, 2013) on platform connectivity, Gillespie (Gillespie, 2014; Gillespie, 2018) on algorithmic governance, and Srnicek (Srnicek, 2017) on platform capitalism, which illuminate the political-economic dimensions of platform infrastructures. Third, we draw on media literacy scholarship, particularly Buckingham (Buckingham, 2007), Potter (Potter, 2019), and the UNESCO MIL framework (Wilson et al., 2011), to identify the gaps and limitations in current pedagogical approaches.

The study employs several complementary methods. The systematic method allows us to synthesize insights from diverse disciplinary sources – philosophy, media studies, education research – into a coherent theoretical framework. The comparative method enables us to contrast traditional MIL approaches with the platform assemblage model, identifying specific points of divergence and innovation. The problem-chronological approach situates the transformation of the media environment within a broader historical trajectory, from the Gutenberg parenthesis of print culture to the platform era. Finally, the analytical method is used to break down the Platform Assemblage into five analytically distinct dimensions, each of which can be examined separately while recognizing their mutual constitution in practice.

The argument proceeds in four stages. First, we diagnose the limitations of traditional MIL frameworks in addressing platform-based media. Second, we introduce the theoretical foundations of the Platform Assemblage model. Third, we articulate the five dimensions of the model and

demonstrate how each translates into specific MIL competencies. Fourth, we explore pedagogical implications and propose a shift from hermeneutics to cartography as the core methodology for media literacy education.

3. Discussion

Traditional media literacy education emerged in response to the mass media of the twentieth century: newspapers, radio, television, and film. Its core competencies were designed to equip citizens with critical tools for navigating a media environment characterized by centralized production, one-way distribution, and relatively stable texts (Buckingham, 2007; Potter, 2019). Key concepts included authorship (who created this message?), format (what genre or medium is it?), audience (who is it for and how might they interpret it?), content (what does it say and how?), and purpose (why was it made?). These questions remain valuable, but they presuppose a media ontology that no longer holds.

The platform environment differs in several fundamental respects. First, production is distributed. Content is not created by identifiable authors but emerges from the interactions of millions of users, algorithmic recommendations, and platform affordances. A viral TikTok video may have no single author; it is a collective emergent of the platform ecosystem. Second, texts are unstable. Content is continuously remixed, repurposed, and recontextualized as it circulates across platforms. A meme is not a fixed text but a family of variations. Third, distribution is algorithmic. What users see is determined not by editorial choice but by recommendation algorithms optimized for engagement. Fourth, value is extracted from interaction. Platforms monetize not content but the data generated by user engagement. Fifth, non-human actors are constitutive. Algorithms, interfaces, and protocols actively shape what can be said, seen, and done.

Traditional MIL frameworks, focused on analyzing discrete texts produced by identifiable authors, cannot adequately address these dimensions. They render the infrastructural layers invisible, leaving learners with tools for interpreting messages but not for understanding the systems that produce and circulate them.

To address this gap, we turn to assemblage theory and actor-network theory, which provide conceptual resources for understanding distributed, processual, and heterogeneous phenomena. Manuel DeLanda's (DeLanda, 2006; DeLanda, 2016) assemblage theory offers a precise ontological vocabulary. An assemblage is a whole whose properties emerge from relations between heterogeneous parts. Its components retain autonomy – they can be “unplugged” from one assemblage and “plugged into” another. Assemblages are defined by twin processes: territorialization, which stabilizes identity and boundaries, and deterritorialization, which destabilizes and opens toward new connections.

Bruno Latour's (Latour 2005) actor-network theory adds the principle of radical symmetry: agency is distributed across networks of human and non-human actants. A platform's recommendation algorithm, its content moderation AI, its interface buttons, its terms of service – these are not passive tools but active mediators that translate and transform action. They make certain realities possible and others impossible.

Applying this lens to platform-based media, we define the Platform Assemblage as a dynamic gathering of heterogeneous actors – human and non-human – whose interactions produce cultural effects. The unit of analysis is not the discrete text but the entire network of relations that brings it forth and gives it meaning.

We identify five constitutive dimensions of any Platform Assemblage. For each dimension, we explain its operation and derive specific competencies for media and information literacy education.

Neuro-Mimetic Resonance: Understanding Affective Capture

Description. Platforms are technologies for synchronizing affect across populations. Memes, trends, and aesthetic templates function as cultural attractors, organizing collective feeling and attention before any propositional content is processed (Connolly, 2002; Papacharissi, 2015). The “This is Fine” meme – a dog in a burning room – spreads not through argument but through participatory alignment with an affective stance of ironic detachment. Platform interfaces capture affect through buttons (like, heart, react) that quantify emotional response and feed it into recommendation algorithms.

MIL Competencies. Learners need to:

– Recognize that media engagement begins at the affective level, before conscious interpretation.

– Identify how platform interfaces (likes, reactions, notifications) are designed to capture and amplify emotion.

– Distinguish between affective resonance and propositional content in media messages.

– Develop metacognitive awareness of their own affective responses to platform content.

– Understand how platforms optimize for high-arousal emotions (outrage, anxiety) because they drive engagement.

Quasi-Biological Replication: Tracing Memetic Evolution

Description. Content on platforms evolves. A source video, image, or text functions as a memetic genome; user responses (parodies, remixes, reactions) are phenotypic expressions subject to variation and selection. Recommendation algorithms act as selective environments, determining which variations thrive (Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2014). The "Hanahaki Disease" trope emerged in fan communities and evolved under the selective pressure of AO3's tagging system, demonstrating how platform infrastructure shapes narrative form.

MIL Competencies. Learners need to:

– Trace the evolution of memes, tropes, and narratives across platforms and over time.

– Understand that content variations are not random but shaped by algorithmic selection pressures.

– Identify how platform features (tags, search, recommendations) function as selective environments.

– Recognize that dominant content forms are not naturally superior but algorithmically favored.

– Analyze how platform business models (engagement optimization, ad revenue) shape evolutionary trajectories.

Chronophagy: Analyzing Attention Economies

Description. Platforms capture and metabolize user time – chronophagy. Infinite scroll, autoplay, push notifications, and streaks are behavioral architectures designed to minimize friction and maximize session length (Crary, 2013; Williams, 2018). Narrative forms evolve to optimize chronophagy: cliffhangers, serialization, and hooks are adapted to platform interfaces that reward continuous engagement.

MIL Competencies. Learners need to:

– Recognize interface elements designed to capture and extend attention (autoplay, infinite scroll, recommendations).

– Understand that platform metrics (views, watch time, engagement) measure attention extraction, not value or quality.

– Develop strategies for intentional platform use, including setting time limits and recognizing choice points.

– Analyze how narrative forms (cliffhangers, serialization) are shaped by chronophagic imperatives.

– Compare chronophagic models across platforms and identify alternatives (e.g., crowdfunding, physical media).

The Dark Matter of the Latent: Navigating Visibility and Invisibility

Description. Public platform content is the visible tip of an iceberg. The greater mass is dark matter: private groups, deleted content, unspoken assumptions, ephemeral messages, and abandoned drafts (Toscano, Kinkle, 2015). Platforms structure visibility through features like “Close Friends,” private accounts, and disappearing messages. Fanon (fan canon) – widely held but unofficial interpretations – exerts gravitational pull on visible culture, sometimes condensing into official content.

MIL Competencies. Learners need to:

– Recognize that much significant communication happens in invisible spaces (private groups, DMs, ephemeral content).

– Understand that platform architectures create gradients of visibility that shape what can be said.

– Distinguish between official content and fanon, recognizing the generative power of unofficial interpretation.

– Develop strategies for navigating private and public spaces safely and ethically.

– Analyze how content moderation and platform policies produce invisibility by removing or demoting content.

Algorithmic Co-Agency: Collaborating with Non-Human Actors

Description. Algorithms are not tools but co-agents, actively shaping cultural form and social practice (Gillespie, 2014; Seaver, 2019). Creators work within fields pre-structured by algorithmic constraints, adapting content to platform metrics. Platforms like AO3 exert taxonomic agency through tagging systems that provide the grammar for collective articulation.

MIL Competencies. Learners need to:

– Recognize that algorithms are active participants in media production, not neutral distributors.

– Understand how platform metrics (views, likes, retention) shape creative decisions.

– Analyze how tagging systems and categories make some content visible and other content obscure.

– Develop critical awareness of how algorithmic feedback loops influence their own content consumption and creation.

– Advocate for algorithmic transparency and participatory governance of platform systems.

4. Results

The five-dimensional model of the Platform Assemblage, translated into MIL competencies, offers more than a simple addition to the existing toolkit of media educators. It proposes a fundamental reconceptualization of what media literacy means and requires in the platform age. In this discussion, we elaborate the theoretical and pedagogical implications of this shift, address potential objections, and outline directions for future research and curriculum development.

From Content Critique to Infrastructure Critique. The most significant implication of the Platform Assemblage model is that it shifts the focus of media literacy from content critique to infrastructure critique. Traditional MIL education teaches students to ask questions about media messages: Who created this? What techniques are used to attract attention? How might different people interpret this message? Whose interests are served? These questions, derived from classic frameworks like the Center for Media Literacy's five core concepts, remain valuable. However, they presuppose that the primary object of analysis is the message itself.

The platform environment renders this presupposition problematic. When a teenager encounters a video on TikTok, the “message” they see is the product of countless infrastructural decisions that precede and shape any content-level analysis. The recommendation algorithm decided to surface this video rather than another. The interface design determined that it would appear in vertical full-screen format with a caption overlay. The platform's business model ensured that it was optimized for engagement metrics rather than informational quality. The content moderation AI filtered out certain elements before the video reached public view. These infrastructural layers are not neutral conduits; they actively constitute what can be seen, said, and known.

Teaching infrastructure critique means equipping learners with concepts and methods for analyzing these layers. Students need to understand that platforms are not simply “where content lives” but active agents in cultural production. They need to recognize that algorithmic systems have politics, that interface designs embody values, and that business models shape communicative possibilities. The five dimensions provide a systematic vocabulary for this critique: learners can analyze how neuro-mimetic resonance captures affect, how quasi-biological replication selects for certain content variations, how chronophagy optimizes for attention extraction, how dark matter structures visibility, and how algorithmic co-agency distributes creative authority.

The Limits of Individualist Approaches to Media Literacy. A second implication concerns the limitations of individualist approaches to media literacy. Much MIL education implicitly assumes that the problem is individual competence: if learners acquire sufficient skills and knowledge, they can navigate the media environment effectively. This assumption underlies competency-based frameworks that enumerate what individuals should know and be able to do. While individual competencies are necessary, they are not sufficient.

The Platform Assemblage model reveals that media environments are structured by forces that cannot be addressed at the individual level alone. No amount of individual critical thinking can change the fact that recommendation algorithms optimize for engagement, that platform business models incentivize outrage and sensationalism, that content moderation systems operate opaquely, or that user data is continuously extracted and commodified. These are collective action problems that require collective responses: regulatory frameworks, platform governance reforms, public interest technologies, and organized user advocacy.

This insight has important pedagogical implications. MIL education must complement individual skill-building with collective literacy: the capacity to understand how platform systems work at scale, to identify points of leverage for collective intervention, and to participate in democratic governance of media infrastructures. Students need opportunities to engage with policy debates about platform regulation, to understand how collective action (boycotts, campaigns, advocacy) can influence platform behavior, and to imagine alternative models of platform governance (cooperatives, public service platforms, community-owned infrastructures). The dark matter dimension, which highlights the generative power of private communities and unofficial interpretations, offers a particularly rich entry point for exploring collective agency outside corporate platform structures.

Developmental and Age-Appropriate Applications. The five-dimensional model is not a one-size-fits-all framework. Different dimensions become relevant at different developmental stages, and pedagogical strategies must be adapted accordingly. We offer preliminary guidelines for age-appropriate implementation:

Early adolescence (ages 11-14). At this stage, learners are developing basic awareness of platform environments but may lack the cognitive maturity for abstract systems thinking. The focus should be on observable dimensions: neuro-mimetic resonance (recognizing how platforms make them feel) and chronophagy (noticing how platforms capture their time). Simple exercises like affect journals (tracking emotional responses to different platform content) and attention audits (logging time spent on different platforms) can build metacognitive awareness without requiring complex theoretical frameworks.

Middle adolescence (ages 14-16). Learners at this stage can engage with more abstract concepts like algorithmic influence and memetic evolution. Activities might include tracing the spread of a meme across platforms, analyzing how their own TikTok feed changes in response to their engagement, or comparing how different platforms surface content. The quasi-biological replication dimension becomes accessible through hands-on investigation of platform dynamics.

Late adolescence (ages 16-18). Older learners can grapple with the full complexity of the model, including the political-economic dimensions of platform capitalism and the ethical questions raised by algorithmic governance. They can engage with the dark matter dimension by exploring questions of privacy, visibility, and community in their own platform use. They can analyze algorithmic co-agency by examining how platforms shape creative production and considering questions of accountability and transparency.

University level and adult education. At the highest level of sophistication, learners can engage with the theoretical foundations of the model, critique its assumptions and limitations, and apply it to original research or advocacy projects. They can explore comparative questions: how do different platform assemblages vary across national contexts, regulatory regimes, or cultural settings? They can investigate historical questions: how did current platform assemblages emerge, and what alternatives have been foreclosed?

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Implementing the Platform Assemblage model in MIL education requires significant teacher preparation. Most educators themselves lack training in platform studies, algorithmic literacy, or infrastructure critique. They may be unfamiliar with concepts from assemblage theory or actor-network theory. They may feel overwhelmed by the complexity and rapid change of platform environments.

Professional development programs should address several key areas. First, teachers need conceptual foundations: a working understanding of the five dimensions and their theoretical underpinnings. Second, they need pedagogical strategies: age-appropriate activities, discussion guides, assessment methods. Third, they need ongoing support: communities of practice where educators can share resources, troubleshoot challenges, and stay current with platform changes. Fourth, they need institutional backing: recognition that infrastructure critique is a legitimate and important component of media literacy, not an optional add-on.

The model itself can serve as a framework for teacher development. By applying the five dimensions to their own professional practice – analyzing how platforms shape their teaching resources, how algorithms influence their professional learning networks, how chronophagy affects their work-life balance – teachers can develop the same competencies they will teach to students.

Research Directions. The Platform Assemblage model opens numerous avenues for future research. We identify several priorities:

Empirical studies of platform assemblages in educational contexts. How do platform assemblages actually functionn in schools and classrooms? What platform-specific literacies are students developing informally, outside formal curricula? How do different platform assemblages shape learning outcomes, social dynamics, and civic engagement?

Comparative studies across platforms and contexts. How do the five dimensions manifest differently across platforms (TikTok vs. YouTube vs. Instagram), across national contexts (different regulatory regimes), and across user populations (different age groups, cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic positions)? What can these comparisons reveal about the contingencies and possibilities of platform design?

Intervention studies. Can explicit instruction in the five-dimensional model improve students' critical agency? What pedagogical strategies are most effective for developing infrastructure critique? How can we measure competencies like "ability to map a platform assemblage" or "capacity to identify algorithmic influence"?

Critical and normative inquiry. What would better platform assemblages look like? How might platforms be designed to support rather than undermine media literacy? What policy frameworks could foster more transparent, accountable, and democratic platform governance? How can the model inform advocacy and reform efforts?

Historical and genealogical research. How did current platform assemblages emerge? What alternatives were proposed, experimented with, or foreclosed? How have platform logics evolved over time, and what trajectories can we project into the future?

Addressing Potential Objections. We anticipate several potential objections to the Platform Assemblage model and offer preliminary responses.

Objection 1: The model is too complex for practical educational use. Response: the full theoretical apparatus is indeed complex, but the five dimensions can be translated into age-appropriate concepts and activities. Just as students learn simplified versions of scientific concepts before encountering their full complexity, they can learn simplified versions of platform critique before engaging with advanced theory. The model provides a coherent framework for progression from basic to advanced understanding.

Objection 2: Platform environments change too rapidly for any stable framework. Response: While platforms change constantly, the underlying dynamics captured by the five dimensions are relatively stable. Recommendation algorithms, attention economics, memetic evolution, and participatory cultures are enduring features of the platform environment, even as specific implementations evolve. The model aims to describe structural dynamics, not transient features.

Objection 3: Infrastructure critique may foster cynicism or disengagement. Response: This is a legitimate concern. Critical analysis without constructive alternatives can indeed produce hopelessness. However, the model also reveals points of leverage and possibility. The dark matter dimension highlights the generative power of communities outside corporate platforms. The algorithmic co-agency dimension opens questions of accountability and design. The pedagogical strategies we propose emphasize not just critique but agency: understanding systems in order to navigate them intentionally and advocate for better alternatives.

Objection 4: The model neglects traditional media literacy competencies. Response: We do not propose replacing traditional competencies but expanding them. Content critique remains essential; it must now be complemented by infrastructure critique. The goal is a richer, more comprehensive media literacy adequate to the platform environment.

The Platform Assemblage model reorients media literacy education toward the infrastructural dimensions of platform-based media. It reveals that individual content critique, while necessary, is insufficient for understanding or navigating contemporary media environments. It points toward collective literacy, developmental sequencing, teacher preparation, and new research directions. Most importantly, it equips learners not just to interpret media messages but to understand and engage with the systems that produce them – a crucial capacity for democratic citizenship in the platform age.

5. Conclusion

The media environment has transformed, but MIL education has not kept pace. While platforms, algorithms, and participatory networks have become the primary infrastructures of cultural production, our pedagogical tools remain rooted in concepts developed for print and

broadcast media. This gap leaves learners ill-equipped to understand, let alone critically engage with, the forces that shape their media environments.

The Platform Assemblage model offers a way forward. By reconceiving media phenomena as dynamic gatherings of heterogeneous actors, it provides conceptual resources for addressing the distributed, processual, and infrastructural dimensions of platform-based media. The five dimensions – neuro-mimetic resonance, quasi-biological replication, chronophagy, dark matter, and algorithmic co-agency – translate directly into MIL competencies, equipping learners with tools for navigating platform-saturated environments.

The pedagogical shift from hermeneutics to cartography – from interpreting texts to mapping processes – is not a rejection of traditional MIL but an expansion. Close reading remains valuable; it must now be complemented by infrastructure critique. Teaching students to interpret media messages remains essential; they must also learn to trace the assemblages that produce and circulate those messages.

This expanded MIL framework serves a broader civic purpose. Democratic citizenship in the platform age requires not just critical consumers but critical participants – people who understand the systems they inhabit and can advocate for more just, transparent, and accountable platforms. The Platform Assemblage model provides conceptual foundations for such citizenship. It reveals that platforms are not neutral technologies but political assemblages, shaped by power relations and open to contestation. Teaching students to map these assemblages is teaching them to read the powers that shape their world – and to imagine how it might be otherwise.

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