

# BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY IN ONTARIO\*

JULIANNA L. KOWLESSAR (SHE/HER), PHD CANDIDATE IN  
COMMUNICATION & CULTURE

*Julianna is a PhD candidate in the joint Communication & Culture program at York and Toronto Metropolitan Universities. She holds an Honours Bachelor of Science in Psychology, an Honours Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies, summa cum laude, and an M.A. in Communication & Culture from York University. Currently, she is a Digital Policy Hub Fellow (2025-2026) for the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and serves as the Director of Engagement & Programming at the Youth Internet Governance Forum (IGF) Canada.*

\*Note that this dissertation title is tentative.

**Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.**

From a young age, I had considered a career as a pediatrician, so my first undergraduate degree was a BSc (Hons) in psychology at York University. However, as I neared the end of my psychology degree, I realized that medical school was not the best fit for me. I took some time to reflect on my academic and professional strengths and was reminded of the subject areas and skills that brought me genuine fulfillment. I particularly valued my strong writing and communication skills, and ultimately chose a different path, entering the rich world of communication studies, where I found my true niche.

During my second undergraduate degree in communication studies, I gained a deeper understanding of critical media literacy in one of the upper-year courses I took, and was inspired to pursue graduate research in this field. This moment of inspiration led me to make a personal commitment: I would always strive for my research to adopt a transformative approach to how young people learn about critical media literacy, specifically through creative and gamified pedagogies.

**Tell us about your dissertation and how it relates to the study of Canada.**

My master's and doctoral work have focused on enhancing critical media literacy education in a Canadian context. I first encountered critical media literacy from an American perspective through the work of Drs. Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share, whom I cite as some of my greatest academic inspirations. Over the years, I've analyzed how the subject is approached in the Canadian education system, particularly in the Ontario curriculum. Dr. Kellner and Dr. Share's work served as a starting point for me to explore how critical media literacy is applied across the North American educational landscape.

I completed my master's in 2023 at York University and Toronto Metropolitan University's Joint Graduate Program in Communication & Culture. My thesis examined how pre-service teachers in Ontario understood and approached critical media literacy to discover practical and unique teaching methods for their future students. I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with participants in their final year of a Bachelor of Education degree program. My key findings revealed that teacher candidates

displayed a nuanced perception of critical media literacy and believed its importance was growing. They also expressed confidence that greater programmatic support for critical media literacy would help them confidently teach it in their future classrooms<sup>1</sup>.

My doctoral dissertation aims to establish a critical media literacy toolkit for youth aged 15 to 24<sup>2</sup>. This toolkit will be designed to help them learn about critical media literacy through games, play-based and creative pedagogical methods. In addition to fostering critical thinking skills, the toolkit will also support the development of essential soft and professional development skills, such as communication, empathy, and resilience, which can support students' academic and professional growth.

As I embark on the dissertation research stage, I plan to collaborate with various educational stakeholders. I will work with first-year communications students, educational professionals, including media educators (elementary, secondary, and post-secondary), and librarians from public and academic libraries across Ontario. By engaging with seasoned media professionals, I hope to gain unique insights that differ from those I collected during my master's interviews. This diverse range of perspectives will contribute to the richness of my research in the field of critical media literacy.

## How did you come to choose this research topic?

The summer of 2020 marked the beginning of my passion for researching critical media literacy. This was during an undergraduate course, "Mediations of Identity" (AP/COMN 4725), with a phenomenal professor and mentor, Dr. Stephen Gennaro. The course focused on critical media literacy, and for one of our major assignments, we were tasked with selecting a theme and creating a unique Monopoly board

to illustrate the principles of intersectional theory. I designed "Hip Hop-opoly," which was one of the most enjoyable and intellectually stimulating projects I had ever worked on<sup>3</sup>. "Hip Hop-opoly" featured twenty-two rappers and demonstrated how their music and lived experiences could be acknowledged through an engagement with intersectional thinking via altered rules, player pieces, and the board itself.

This assignment, along with the course in general, prompted me to thoughtfully reflect on the potential of board games as pedagogical tools to teach critical media literacy principles to students, serving their diverse learning styles and needs. Ultimately, COMN 4725, coupled with my understanding of critical media literacy from the perspectives of Drs. Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share, in their 2019 book, *The Critical Media Literacy Guide: Engaging Media and Transforming Education*, set my graduate journey in motion and inspired me to conduct research on critical media literacy in a Canadian context.

## What are the main takeaways you want others to come away with?

1. Pre-service teachers in Ontario do not feel adequately supported (through educational resources or mentorship opportunities) to approach teaching their future students about critical media literacy through innovative and diverse forms of pedagogy<sup>4</sup>.
2. There is immense value in exploring how critical media literacy is taught in global education systems to determine how it might be augmented within the Ontario curriculum and broader Canadian context.
3. Engaging with key educational stakeholders, including, but not limited to, students, educators, and librarians, can offer insight into

how critical media literacy research should be conducted to optimally benefit these groups<sup>5</sup>.

**Tell us about the challenges that you as a researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.**

As a media literacy researcher, I have experienced some challenges in navigating the curriculum gaps concerning critical media literacy education in Canada. Although Canada has been a leader in the media literacy education movement<sup>6</sup>, more critical approaches to living and learning with media have remained minimal in education policy and practice, especially in Ontario. In addition, a unified, nationwide approach to critical media literacy education does not exist since standards vary across the Canadian provinces and territories<sup>7</sup>. As I continue to explore the practical applications of critical media literacy education and its potential in Canada, I have been committed to regularly reflecting on the strengths and limitations of current curricula and envisioning strategies to support educational stakeholders in effectively learning about the subject.

**Tell us what you enjoy the most about the work you do.**

As a true interdisciplinarian and lifelong learner, I find great joy in my work. Media literacy offers a diverse range of possibilities, especially in its adaptability to reach a broad audience. The richness of the field allows me to explore how various media shape society and influence notions of identity and power. Over the years, I have cherished the opportunities to delve into these complexities myself and, more importantly, share and teach others about them. My ultimate goal is to help people, particularly youth, become more critical, informed, and empowered in their engagement with everyday media.

**What advice do you have for those starting their academic journey?**

1. Take time to learn about yourself and your evolving interests - your strengths can sometimes emerge from unexpected areas.
2. Always make time for your hobbies and stay open to discovering new ones. On a personal level, scheduling time to play guitar, strength train, bake, and follow my favourite sports has helped me maintain balance throughout my graduate journey. In my view, pursuing your hobbies can also be a helpful way to manage stress, stay creative, and keep perspective - all of which can positively impact your research and long-term success.

**What are the next steps in your research?**

I plan to begin conducting my doctoral research in the Winter of 2026. My dissertation will outline a comprehensive pedagogical resource to support critical media literacy skills development in Ontario. To support and establish this plan, I will work with key educational stakeholder groups, including students and media educators. The study will involve these two main participant groups. The qualitative and constructivist aspects of my research will employ tools such as qualitative observation, reflexive and iterative pedagogy, and engaging participants as co-researchers, elements that borrow extensively from Participant Action Research (PAR).

## Notes

**1.** Kowlessar, J. (2023). Assessing teacher candidates' attitudes on critical media literacy education [MA Thesis, York University].

<https://hdl.handle.net/10315/41620>

**2.** Statistics Canada. (2024, October 1). Age categories, life cycle groupings.

<https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/concepts/definitions/age2>

**3.** See figure Appendix B, Figure B1 in Kowlessar (2023, p. 113) for an example of Hip Hop-opoly.

**4.** See Kowlessar, (2023).

**5.** Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2019). *The critical media literacy guide: Engaging media and transforming education*. Brill Sense.

**6.** Arke, E. (2013). Media literacy: History, progress, and future hopes. In K. E. Dill (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of Media Psychology* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195398809.001.0001>.

**7.** MediaSmarts. (n.d.). Digital and media literacy outcomes by province & territory.

<https://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-media-literacy-outcomes-province-territory/ontario>