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On Why “Intellectual Work is Cathartic” and Other Reflections About Teaching Media: An Interview With Mary Vavrus

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On Why “Intellectual Work is Cathartic” and Other Reflections About Teaching Media:

An Interview With Mary Vavrus

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Dr. Mary Vavrus is a tenured professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Minnesota. Her research interests include media, gender, political economy, and militarism. Her most recent book is titled Post-Feminist War: Women in the Media-Military Industrial Complex. Mary is an exceptional scholar, but she is also known by many to be an exceptionally caring, thoughtful, and dedicated educator and advisor. She currently serves as the course coordinator for undergraduate Media Literacy sections and as the department’s liaison for undergraduate intensive writing classes. She has also served as the Director of Graduates Studies and has advised over 20 graduate students. Mary has played a large role in making the department’s critical media track—for both undergraduate and graduate students—what it is today. It is for these reasons that Teaching Media Quarterly asked her to share her insight on teaching media in the undergraduate classroom in the contemporary political moment.

Megan: How do you understand teaching media in this contemporary political climate?

Mary: When you say current political climate, I especially think of since the campaign and election of Donald Trump and how that has intensified a lot of political disturbances. I think it is increasingly important, and never more so than in this current environment, to teach about and study media because Trump was enabled and possibly put in power by media practices. This includes hacking and micro targeting through social media as well as him having the Fox News Corporation and Wall Street Journal on his side. He also has other right wing media working on his and the other republicans’ behalf.

When you think about how different forms of media have enabled him and his agenda—and his agenda is the agenda of the GOP—it is really important to understand how media can be weaponized. It is possible to overwhelm students with that information. Regardless, it is important to illuminate how weaponizing different media platforms and outlets can work to elevate and empower someone who behaves like an autocrat, who is authoritarian, and who has misogynistic and racist policies and agendas.

I have always thought it is important to understand how media inform and work within current political contexts. This moment in particular is so important for illustrating this—and you don’t even have to scratch very far below the surface to find examples. In fact, a lot of mainstream news media have taken up this issue of how social media and other different forms of right wing media can be used to elevate someone like Trump. Studying media can show students that ignorance about media can be very dangerous for us all. It seems like every day there is at least one new revelation about how some aspect of media has contributed to the rise in power

of Trump and the GOP. For instance, look at how the National Rifle Association (NRA) has worked with him. They are such a dangerous organization and they have used media in particular ways to produce and sponsor politicians who will make the policy changes they want (like deregulating gun ownership) just so they can do the lobbying for gun manufacturers. The NRA has worked closely with the Trump administration and it is important to understand how a lobby group with dangerous aims can also work literally to weaponize media and to enable a very anti-social agenda. As I said, there are so many examples. The NRA is just one.

Megan: How have you adapted your teaching to respond to different social and political events (such as the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings, Immigration policy, LGBTQ rights)?

Mary: It is not like I have to seek out these issues and say, “see this is relevant to our class,” because there are so many things coming up these days—and in the last two years especially—that pertain to media classes that I teach. For so many of the concepts I teach there are a lot of real world and current examples to draw from. For example, when I was teaching Feminist Media Studies in Fall (2018) we talked about how practices by and activism from transgender people have really changed the way we think about gender. They have cast the gender binary into question and in many ways dissolved it. It makes you think about the ways transgender and non-binary folks are revolutionizing the study of gender, including our understanding of it, how we live it, and how policy makers respond to issues around gender. When the Trump administration made the announcement that they are going to define transgender out of existence within policy, it provided a poignant case study for students to apply media concepts. Specifically, it allowed us to think through how representations help constitute the meaning of people, events, practices, and things. In class we talked about how this announcement illustrated the concept of representation but also showed how important public policy is to definitions of gender. We were able to think about how the way we practice gender can never be separated from structural forces that seek to restrain, discipline, and police gender practices. That announcement by the administration was such a good—and, of course, sad—example of how that happens. It naturally made a good discussion topic.

Even before Trump appeared on the scene as a presidential candidate and, in fact, when I started teaching media classes in the 1990s I was able to see a lot of examples from the world we were living in. It is important to teach theory, concepts, and methods in the abstract but also show how they can be applied in real time when these kinds of issues come up. Issues seem to come up quickly and frequently. This is not just because of Trump. Rather, it is the nature of media themselves. This is especially true with social media and their ability to speed everything up and the way they are changing the nature of media work. It is extremely important to arm ourselves with theoretical tools to help us make sense of media and then to put those theories into practice. This means we not only want to make sense of media but also we need to figure out how to respond and how to intervene.

One thing I enjoy in the classes that I teach is requiring students to think of a fix for whatever problem they are identifying in their research project. Sometimes the media object that they are looking at is itself a fix. It is always interesting to see them delineate the reasons why it is a

fix and to see how creative they get with it. It is refreshing to think, “oh yeah, you’re beginning to think about interventions!” Some are quite practical and hopeful. Many of these students are getting ready to graduate and go out in the world and possibly become cultural producers themselves. With any luck, they’ll have thoughts about fixes and interventions in mind when they go out to do their paid labor.

Megan: You were teaching Feminist Media Studies during the Kavanaugh hearings. How did that play out in the classroom?

Mary: It just so happened that Trump’s nomination of Brett Kavanaugh occurred right around the time we were beginning to talk about Stuart Hall’s theory of representation and learning what signifiers and signifieds are and how they work together to constitute representations. We talked about how media representations constitute the meaning of things. As a class people watched or listened to the hearings, particularly the parts with Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony about Kavanaugh’s sexual assault against her. Students were upset. This was a triggering event for a number of them. I knew that from comments they had made directly and indirectly.

With that, I thought we needed to do an exercise that would illustrate what Stuart Hall’s theory could do while also take into account this rapidly unfolding situation. We did an in-class exercise where we looked at some still images associated with the hearings. We looked at images of Brett Kavanaugh and one of Christine Blasey Ford juxtaposed with an old photo of Anita Hill during her testimony in 1991. We looked at those images as signifiers, and we talked about what they might signify. We came up with many different descriptions that we could associate with them, especially the images with Brett Kavanaugh and Christin Blasey Ford. We discussed how Kavanaugh’s demeanor was associated with a frat boy, jock culture. He got a lot of benefit from his gender, race, and elite class—he went to an elite boys’ school, was from a wealthy family in DC, and in general had a lot of advantages. We could read a lot of that in the image we analyzed and also from his video performance in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

It was an interesting exercise because students noticed a lot of different signifiers that work together to constitute the meaning of different things. White male privilege, supreme court justice, and alleged perpetrator can be masked behind signifiers that we associate with above-board people, or people who wouldn’t do such a thing. Yet, here he is, alleged to have done terrible things. In the end it was an excellent exercise for looking at how a theoretical construct can be applied to a real-time, distressing situation. For some students, it relieved them because they could write about the events in a way that was more cathartic. I hope that is something that can travel with students after the class is over. That is, the act of writing and the act of theorizing and doing intellectual work can be cathartic. It can be a way to work through trauma. It can be a way to at least decrease some of the distress that people feel about these situations. I know it is not the only way to help, but writing about it and talking about it in intellectual ways can be remedial on some level.

Megan: Thinking about all the media courses you teach (Introduction to Electronic Media, Communicating War, Feminist Media Studies, and Political Economy of Media), which units/topics get particularly strong responses from students?

Mary: I don't have to think too hard about it. It is usually the political economy unit. When I first taught at the University of Minnesota and I started teaching the political economy class students were really jazzed about it—with the exception of one group. But I also teach a unit of it in all my other classes. Students tend to react strongly. It's a pivotal moment in the sense that a lot of people who are just cruising through the class and are not as engaged end up getting engaged when we start talking about how the media system we have today is the product of different policies and historical decisions and that there are structural forces at work that created the media system.

Our media system looked very different 30 years ago before deregulation started. It looks a whole lot different now because of mergers and acquisitions and the explosion of the right wing media sphere, which itself was enabled by a whole bunch of policy decisions. When we start talking about that and students start to see how this system has been transformed and the reasons why, it makes a lot of them into much more critical media users. Almost without fail, for a sizable contingency of students, political economy really grabs them. For whatever reason, it makes them much more engaged. When we start talking about how media policy, the FCC and different public agencies are supposed to be regulating media, students will start bringing examples to class and keep up on current events that have to do with media a lot more.

I almost think it is an issue that connects their sense of citizenship with their media use. They can see media and studying media is more than what reality TV franchise is going to be continuing on for another decade, or which stars are going to play their favorite roles. Rather, they start to see why we have certain media products and not others or certain media messages and not others. They see it as a result of policy, practices, and ownership instead of natural forces.

Megan: Given that you have always had a strong response from students when teaching political economy, do you feel like there has been even more of an intense response in the aftermath of the election and some of the broader revelations about media's implication in politics?

Mary: I have only taught political economy as a stand-alone class once since the election and that was the one group that was not very engaged in the subject matter. I talked with the teaching assistant about why that might be. Although I am not entirely sure what the reason was, I think some of it may have been that there were so many current examples of so much distressing stuff. I would bring those examples into class to illustrate different concepts, but it is possible that it was just too overwhelming. A lot was going on that semester with the Mueller investigation scrutinizing Cambridge Analytica and its association with Russian hackers. The NRA was being investigated and then there was the mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School. We started looking at all these different connections and, frankly, it was a way for me to

try and illustrate how course concepts come to life all the time. But I think for them it might have been too much to hear that we were all being exploited by our favorite social media platforms.

That is a hard thing to come to grips with: when you realize no matter how well-educated we are, we can be micro targeted with algorithms and hacked. The Cambridge Analytica whistle blower, Christopher Wylie, said they were “targeting our inner demons,” and that is a very tough thing to think about. That may have played a large part in the students’ disengagement. When I included political economy units in other classes such as Communicating War or Feminist Media Studies, students love it. To have an entire class dedicated to demonstrating how our media system is exploiting us and not working in the favor of our interest or democracy—from the micro to the macro—is not as easy on students.

Megan: I am thinking of how you said you encourage students to think of solutions for problems. Perhaps it is overwhelming to think of a fix for political economy issues, which are so vast and have built up over so many years.

Mary: Exactly. It truly is a multi-decade destruction of the system. Certainly that can overwhelm students in a class that is entirely dedicated to that issue. Nonetheless, the topic of political economy in my other classes really does catch students’ attention more so than any other topic. For instance in Communicating War, we talk about the military industrial complex. We go back to Eisenhower. We even go back to Smedley Butler, who was a WWI Major General, giving a speech called “War is a Racket” where he talked about the different ways war profiteers made money through exploitation and the war economy. When students start to realize that these people and organizations—including the media system—profit from war, it makes them angry. It makes them want to do something about it. It is a catalytic kind of moment that changes their perspective and makes them more critical.

Megan: In light of growing overt hostility toward marginalized groups as well as the continued resistance that we’ve seen, have you noticed class dynamics, attitudes, and discussions change? How so?

Mary: What I have seen is a lot more distress and anxiety among students. In Feminist Media Studies, which I recently taught, 25% of students had accommodation letters for mental health. In another class it was 20%. That is higher than I have ever seen. I have taught larger lecture courses throughout the years and in the past I would get two or three students out of 120-150 students with letters. But the percentage of accommodation letters is not the only measure. A lot of measuring comes from conversations with students. I hear from students—some who are getting treated for stress and anxiety but not all. In general, there’s a lot of stress, anxiety and uncertainty about the future. It is understandable. They might be coming from families where some are undocumented immigrants. If they come from countries covered under the Muslim ban, then they have that to worry about. There are so many Somalis in the Twin Cities, and Somalia is one of the countries under that ban. I can see students’ anxiety non-verbally. I hear

about it directly. I can hear it in their conversations with one another in class discussion. There are all kinds of different ways students have been expressing their distress.

On the other hand, before 2008 or so it was not uncommon to have gadfly students who were proudly gadfly and didn't want to hear about what they likely thought of as "snowflake nonsense." They did not want to even consider the life experiences of people who weren't like them. But I have noticed that since then the classroom has much more of a sympathetic dynamic. There are far fewer gadflies whose *raison d'être* is to be a gadfly. That's not to say there aren't students who express skepticism or want to debate issues. But it is this other kind of student who seems to be in classes for the sole purpose to goad and bedevil other students rather than learn anything new. Those students are not around as much, at least in my classroom. I am sure they are still out there. It is possible I have been around long enough that they know not to cross me on that. Overall, in the classroom I see a lot more sympathy and empathy toward fellow students more recently. That is such a good thing. There have been so many years of Reaganomics, individualism, and neoliberal thinking. Maybe now students are realizing that these policies are damaging to their own lives. Maybe the recession had something to do with it too. When students' families were losing their houses and their jobs with such frequency, maybe that was partially responsible for the increased sympathy in the classroom.

Megan: Do you think you have done anything in particular to prompt that kind of atmosphere of sympathy and empathy, or did it seem to come on its own?

Mary: I don't think I have done anything specifically. It may be because I have been doing this a long time that I am better at preempting certain things in the classroom. I can't imagine that I had much to do with the shift overall, though. The bellwether is the large lecture class, because those draw all kinds of people from all over the place. And many students feel that is going to be an environment in which they feel disengaged. But the more we make the link between their everyday lives and the media system, the more interested they are in contributing.

Over the years I have noticed fewer students are skeptical about the ways media can affect their lives. For example, when I first got here I was teaching the introductory class. I used Lynn Spigel's work on television during the Cold War in which she discusses this very palpable sense of concern about Russian surveillance. We were supposed to be looking out to make sure there were no "Manchurian Candidates" living next door. People were concerned that their televisions were surveilling them—so much so that when their televisions weren't on they would cover them. When I first began to teach this to students they thought it was absolutely hilarious and they found it so amusing. Now they do not show any skepticism ever because, as we've come to learn, our media are watching us. Most of the students now have a clear sense of how social media can do this, how laptop cameras can be turned on remotely, how we are tracked across the internet. They've become more sympathetic and responsive to the curriculum we teach.

Megan: Finally, what are some opportunities or strains you feel in your specific role as a tenured professor, graduate advisor, and course coordinator?

Mary: I feel like it is all opportunity. Since I arrived at the University of Minnesota, I have felt very lucky. This is because the University has always been very supportive of media education and research. When I arrived at the Communication Studies Department there was not a separate media studies track. It was subsumed by rhetoric and interpersonal communication, depending on what kind of research one wanted to do. But the three of us who were teaching media classes—Don Browne, David Rarick, and me—were really passionate about it. And the students started to clamor to have a separate media track. We started to think about that and how to get separate job hires for media. We then established the track and called it “critical media studies” to separate it from the School of Journalism’s way of understanding media as mass communication. The critical part was put there to emphasize how we were understanding media as always illuminating power relations from the structural to micro levels. The larger guiding philosophy that has been embraced in our department is teaching media in terms of media literacy. This means understanding media in order to become more aware and informed citizens of the world.

I have also felt lucky because we have had so many great graduate students come our way. The fact that graduate students teach media literacy courses, which is a cornerstone in the media curriculum, is great. Graduate students are involved in teaching and taking on teaching assistantships for the introductory lecture course to media and other classes. It is wonderful that they are capable of doing that. The department benefits greatly from graduate student teaching and research. The graduate students are active and thoughtful and focused on how to teach most effectively. They figure out how to bring contemporary theories and media trends into the classroom.

Overall, there are very few strains. I know of many other researchers and educators who do not have it as good as I do. I am so thankful that the University of Minnesota is so supportive of media research. I have also had some very productive collaboration with the School of Journalism. We’ve had all sorts of intellectual-pedagogical-professional synergy that has been useful. I also applaud *Teaching Media Quarterly*, which is the product of the hard work of graduate students in the Communication Studies Department, here at the University of Minnesota.