

PRACTITIONER BRIEFING

Why should we teach lurker literacies in the parasocial media age?

Written by Gina Sipley, SUNY Nassau Community College and Jennifer Southard, Adelphi University

OVERVIEW

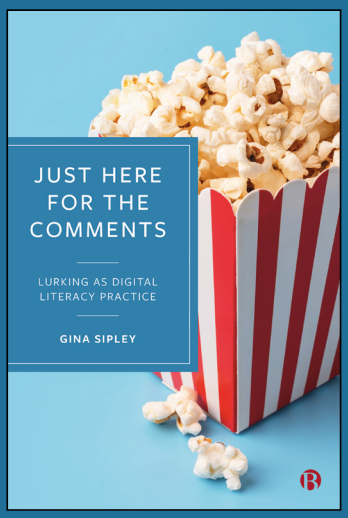
Effective teaching of digital literacies remains an essential part of building and maintaining democratic practice. boyd (2026) asserts that social media has become a parasocial experience. Where social media was once a space for genuine social connection, interaction now shifts towards engagement organized around attention, influence and audience relationships, thus becoming parasocial. This shift is a response to platform governance structures that prioritize surveillance and data collection, and signals 1) the importance of understanding how lurker literacies operate and 2) why they should be taught as part of a digital literacy curriculum in schools, universities and other community settings.

- Lurking accounts for 90 per cent of all participation on social media.
- Global digital literacy instruction focuses primarily on the production of public-facing content.
- Lurking is an active form of non-public participation that is distinct from scrolling.
- Teaching lurker literacies promotes democratic participation.

CONTEXT

In the age of parasocial media, scrolling is more common than posting. The content we encounter is largely determined by algorithms and calculated for maximum engagement. This shift heightens the need for a new model of digital literacy that centres the reading practices of lurkers.

Understanding lurking as a literacy practice positions non-public participation as more than just scrolling; it is an active form of digital engagement that has real-world offline effects for platforms, communities, businesses and society. Lurkers are a financially valuable asset to the platforms that host them and to the entrepreneurs in the digital economy who rely on profits from lurk views and offline word-of-mouth communication. Lurking can also be a leisurely pursuit that over time mobilizes social action. From this position, educators can guide students to become cognizant of how their lurking impacts offline communities and democratic participation in the parasocial paradigm.



Just Here for the Comments by Gina Sipley is published by Bristol University Press, May 2024.

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FINDINGS

The study identifies five lurker literacies that educators can use to help students understand how lurking is a participatory act with real-world offline effects:

- **Receptive reading:** Reading to understand a divergent point of view.
- **Participatory restraint:** Purposefully avoiding publicity metrics to halt the spread of information.
- **Sensemaking:** Reading to understand one's place in the community.
- **Reflexive entertainment:** Reading for enjoyment while being mindful of one's evolving role in the audience.
- **Protective curation:** Reading to protect one's professional or social status.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Recommendations for how to account for lurking in a digital literacy curriculum:

- Include lurker literacies in digital literacy learning standards, e.g.:
    - Identify lurking as an aspect of digital use, fluency, literacy and citizenship.
    - Describe specific lurker literacies in context.
    - Manage lurking behaviours to reflect an understanding of the potential benefits and consequences in both online and offline spaces.
- Design learning experiences around the following objectives:
    - Learners will **analyse how platform design and algorithmic recommendations influence exposure to ideas**, evaluating how to balance platform reliance with offline community support to maintain personal agency and digital wellbeing.
    - Learners will **evaluate the impact of their active and passive engagement choices** (e.g. viewing, hovering, clicking, commenting) on the spread of information, choosing when to publicly participate or purposefully practise restraint.
    - Learners will **investigate how online environments shape their sense of identity and community belonging**, distinguishing between platform-driven social norms and their authentic self-concept.

The benefits of teaching lurker literacies in a parasocial context:

- Social and equity benefits:
    - Prioritizes the persistence of democratic processes by recognizing lurking as an active form of civic participation that deeply engages with information (and misinformation).
    - Receptive reading introduces new ideas. Relying on the content served through the platform's algorithm limits exposure to divergent thought.
    - Participatory restraint can be an act of resistance against surveillance. It is both an attempt to protect personal information and a method to limit the circulation of ideas. Micrometrics like hovering and scrolling send data back to the platform about what content is valuable. Reading choices influence what other people see in their feeds.
    - Reflexive entertainment requires active reflection during each instance of lurking to determine whether it amplifies injustice.
    - Sensemaking leads to the discovery of information to better understand one's identity. In a parasocial context, the platform algorithm has an outsized influence on shaping identity formation.
    - Protective curation becomes more challenging in a parasocial environment because genuinely authored content is not frequently shared.

AUTHOR BIO

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