Media Literacy

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THE CHANGING NATURE OF MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy has been defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts" (Christ & Potter 1998, 7). This definition, produced by the USA's 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, is widely accepted, although many competing conceptions exist. However, media literacy research and associated educational initiatives and communication policy reflect enduring tensions between educationalists and technologists, policy makers and critical scholars (≅ Critical Theory), defenders of high culture and defenders of public morals (Potter 2004). Media literacy is associated more specifically with audiovisual literacy, digital literacy, advertising literacy, Internet literacy, film literacy, visual literacy, ≅ health literacy etc., each reflecting the range of media forms that demand, or assume, knowledge about media on the part of the ≅ audience or ≅ public. In recent years 'media literacy' has also become a shorthand way of pointing to the array of policies and initiatives designed to bridge the gap between what people know about the changing media environment and what they need to know in order to meet certain policy goals.

Traditionally, media literacy research has been conducted on audiovisual media, though attention is increasingly turning to emerging digital and online technologies (e.g., ≅ Internet, digital television, mobile communications). The priority now is to develop a subtle and detailed account of how people understand, trust, and critically evaluate information and communication contents delivered on new platforms, and disseminated and regulated in unfamiliar ways, that can match the analysis already developed for audience's understanding of (mass, broadcast) television content. By contrast with the related term ≅ "information literacy," the media literacy tradition generally stresses the understanding, comprehension, critique, and creation of media materials, whereas the information literacy tradition places more emphasis on the access, identification, location, evaluation, and use of information materials (Livingstone et al, 2008). One reason is that the media literacy agenda was developed at a time when, in developed countries at least, access was not seen as a significant problem or source of inequality, but media ownership and content have been regarded more critically – hence the importance to this tradition of critical literacy. As the media and communication environment diversifies, issues of access and inequality merit increased attention.

While print literacy research has always balanced the study of reading with the study of writing, media literacy research has paid more attention to questions of reception than creation of content. But in the digital media and communication environment, opportunities to create content are transformed. It is important, therefore, that all dimensions of the definition of media literacy – access, understand, and create – are valued, for otherwise research risks positioning the audience as recipient rather than, as is increasingly possible, also producer. Producing content may be conceived fairly minimally – e.g., visiting chatrooms – or more ambitiously, in a manner generally not possible for audiovisual media, precisely because in relation to digital technologies such as the Internet the limitations on volume and accessibility of content, and on the tools to produce content, are modest. The world wide web includes many sites constructed by ordinary members of the public, both as individuals and as part of their local or community roles. Consequently, questions of equality and exclusion, and of authority and quality, are all on the agenda for media literacy research.

MEDIA LITERACY AMONG CHILDREN

Although it is increasingly recognised that media literacy is important across the life-span (≅ Communication Skills across the Life-Span), academic research and educational initiatives have historically focused more on children than on adults, in recognition of their particular vulnerability to media persuasion. The relationship between children's age and the development of media literacy is well established. Drawing on Piaget's theory of cognitive development (Valkenburg 2000), reviews of empirical research on how children of different ages understand media content (usually television programs and advertisements) tell a fairly consistent story. Notwithstanding some concerns regarding the cross-cultural validity and normative assumptions of a "stage"-based theory of development, this research generally maps stages in the development of media literacy onto Piaget's pre-operational stage (ages 2–7), concrete operational stage (ages 7–12), and formal operational stage (age 12+) of cognitive development.

It seems that before about 3 years old, children see not only life but also ≅ television as William James's famous "blooming, buzzing confusion" – a potpourri of colors, music, movement, faces, and repetition – though there is beginning to be more research on very young infants' understanding of media. Before about 5 years old, children tend to regard television as a window on the world, though they begin to distinguish television from reality. Nor do they understand that ≅ advertising is persuasive rather than informational, though they are already sensitive to gender cues in television content.

By about 7 or 8 years old, children have begun to distinguish genres of programs; they tend to find the realism of the ≅ news more frightening than ≅ cartoons; they have begun to recognize the persuasive intent of advertisements. After around 8 years old, children are generally competent in "putting the narrative together" – making inferences about sequencing, causality and morality in narrative, for example. Further, they show a growing interest in production, being critical of content, making more subtle comparisons between television and reality (recognizing that content can be fabricated and yet still make "real" claims about the world if the portrayal is "possible"; Dorr 1986; ≅ Fantasy–Reality Distinction).

By 10 or 11 years of age, children enjoy critiquing the acting, decor, and narrative aspects of television content, increasingly drawing on their own social knowledge to judge the realism of television content. Lastly, from about 12 years old, children's critical judgments are of growing sophistication: they show awareness of bias and ≅ stereotypes; they make subtle aesthetic judgments (≅ Aesthetics), being aware of different styles of ≅ realism; and they have a stronger understanding of the purpose of advertising and ≅ branding, often becoming skeptical or distrustful of advertising (van Evra 1998).

MEDIA LITERACY AMONG ADULTS

An recent survey in the UK, Ofcom's 2008 Adult Media Literacy Audit, revealed that as basic levels of access to digital media are increasing, so too is the use of online information sources (e.g. for health). As a result, more adults than in recent years now check on the reliability of a website and more are critical of the quality or trustworthiness of broadcast and online content. However, although only a few lack the confidence to use creative tools on digital platforms, most (still) have not done this in practice. This survey also found little change in terms of the demographics of those reluctant to use the digital functions of various media – older people, women and those of lower socioeconomic status showed lower levels of awareness, interest and confidence. On the other hand, while young adults had the greatest confidence and use of digital media, their critical knowledge of media funding sources was the lowest, and by comparison with their knowledge of the broadcast environment, the majority at all ages were unclear how online and mobile content is regulated.

One challenge is then how to reach people, to promote media literacy underpinning the skills and knowledge for a flexible, engaged, participatory and competitive society, especially for adults no longer in the formal education system. Another challenge is how to measure media literacy and evaluate the success of media literacy initiatives. Further, theories of media literacy say little about standards and progression, and despite the existence of a media education curriculum for children, formal expectations regarding adult media literacy and associated digital skills are rarely formulated (by contrast with clear targets set for print literacy in many nations).

POLICY RELEVANCE: MEDIA EDUCATION AND MEDIA REGULATION

Policy initiatives in relation to media literacy fall into two categories. In the field of education, there have

long been attempts to establish media literacy as a required part of the school curriculum, arguing that, while reading and writing (i.e., print literacy) have long been accepted as central to education, the ability to understand and communicate in the realm of audiovisual and, more recently, computer-based or digital literacies must also be recognized as important. In addition to the resource limitations that limit the success of these efforts, the contested philosophy behind media literacy has also impeded educational initiatives worldwide. Educators differ regarding their valuation of media content: put simply, is media literacy best understood as a means of inoculating children against the potential harms of the media or as a means of enhancing their appreciation of the literary merits of the media (Christ & Potter 1998)?

The second category of policy initiative concerns media and communication regulation (≅ Communication and Law). In the UK, section 11 of the 2003 Communications Act requires the regulator, Ofcom, to "promote media literacy" among the UK population. A

t the European level, media literacy came to prominence as part of the Lisbon Agenda (i2010) to get European citizens and businesses online (and written into the Audiovisual Media Services Directive;); it now has a clear place in the European Commission's Digital Agenda.

In the US, the Federal Communications Commission recognises lack of digital literacy, along with economic disadvantage, as a barrier to the adoption of new technologies, making the promotion of literacy in the digital age as important to national economic competitiveness as was print literacy to the industrial age. Internationally, there are many further developments from organisations such as UNESCO, Unicef, the International Telecommunications Union, the Internet Governance Forum, and others.

THE VALUE AND PURPOSES OF MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy research depends partly on the discipline of those who study it. Those more influenced by the arts and humanities see media literacy as a route to enhancing the public's appreciation of, and ability to contribute creatively to, the best that the cultural and audiovisual arts have to offer. The focus is on pleasure and interpretation, creativity and diversity, originality and quality. By contrast, the social science approach sees media literacy as a form of defense against the normative messages of the big media corporations, whose commercialized, stereotyped, unimaginative, and parochial worldview dominates mass culture in capitalist societies. The focus is therefore on ≅ uses and gratifications, influences and ≅ cultivation effects, and everyday cognitive and social mediations of mass culture (Livingstone et al. 2008).

As media and communication technologies increasingly mediate many spheres of activity, not just leisure and entertainment but also work, civic participation, education, and community, there is growing consensus that media literacy is important for (1) democracy, participation, and active citizenship, since a media-literate society is better able to support an informated, critical, and inclusive public sphere; (2) the knowledge economy, competitiveness, and choice, since in a market economy increasingly based on information, often in a complex and mediated form, media literacy supports innovation and creativity, sustaining a rich array of choices for the consumer; and (3) lifelong learning, cultural expression, and personal fulfillment, since our highly reflexive, heavily mediated symbolic environment informs and frames the choices, values, and knowledge that give significance to everyday life. Arguments such as these are leading to the incorporation of media literacy into a wider agenda for digital citizenship and digital participation – among both governments and critical researchers (Jenkins 2006).

Significant differences of opinion persist, however, over whether media literacy should be conceived as an individual accomplishment or a social and cultural practice, how much emphasis should be placed on critiquing the media, and whether media literacy is better achieved through education or citizenship initiatives. For some purposes, a cognitive approach that prioritizes the acquisition of clearly defined skills is preferable, being most easily promoted, implemented, and evaluated. Others, those drawing on a long history of cultural critique of the uses and misuses of print literacy, would take a more macro-social position (Luke 1989), arguing that literacy concerns the historically and culturally conditioned relationship among three processes, no one of which is sufficient alone: (1) the symbolic and material representation of knowledge, culture, and values; (2) the diffusion of interpretive skills and abilities across a (stratified) population; and (3) the institutional, and especially the state, management of the power that access to and skilled use of knowledge brings to those who are "literate".

SEE ALSO: ℂ Advertising ℂ Aesthetics ℂ Audience ℂ Branding ℂ Cartoons ℂ Communication and Law ℂ Communication Skills across the Life-Span ℂ Critical Theory ℂ Cultivation Effects ℂ European Union: Communication Law ℂ Fantasy–Reality Distinction ℂ Health Literacy ℂ Information Literacy ℂ Internet ℂ News ℂ Public ℂ Realism ℂ Rhetoric and Orality-Literacy Theorems ℂ Stereotypes ℂ Television ℂ Uses and Gratifications

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