

Media Literacy

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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 alternative and competing conceptions also exist. As the subject of academic research, educational initiatives and communication policy (Potter 2004), media literacy research reflects enduring tensions between critical scholars (→ Critical Theory) and policymakers, educationalists and technologists, defenders of high culture and defenders of public morals. Associated with media literacy is a variety of related concepts – advertising literacy, Internet literacy, film literacy, visual literacy, → health literacy etc. – these reflecting the range of media forms that demand, or assume, knowledge about media on the part of the → audience or → public.

MEDIA LITERACY AMONG CHILDREN

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.

Between about 7 and 11 years old, children are in a transitional phase as regards media literacy. 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

Media literacy research and initiatives have focused more on children than on adults, and the theory of children’s development of media literacy is more developed than that for adults. For children, there are developed media education programs that specify age-appropriate skills, progression across levels, and methods for evaluating the delivery of a formal curriculum according to age-graded levels of achievement. Yet media literacy is important across the life-span (→ Communication Skills across the Life-Span). One challenge is how to reach people, to promote media literacy, if they are not in the formal education system. Another 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 are rarely formulated (by contrast with 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 online 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 (Buckingham 1998; Hobbs 1998)?

The second category of policy initiative concerns media and communication regulation (→ Communication and Law). In the UK, for example, section 11 of the 2003 Communications Act requires the regulator, Ofcom, to “promote media literacy” among the UK population, and in order to implement this, the regulator has drawn on academic work to define media literacy as “the ability to access, understand and create communications in a

variety of contexts.” The Council of Europe similarly encourages media literacy training for children to enable the benefits of the changing media and communication environment and to reduce the risks of harmful content and contact (→ European Union: Communication Law). In this context, media literacy represents a tool to empower the public to manage the increasingly complex media and information environment and, arguably, permits the legitimate deregulation of the media content industry.

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. in press).

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: in a democratic society, a media-literate individual is more able to gain an informed opinion on matters of the day, and to be able to express their opinion individually and collectively in public, civic, and political domains, while a media-literate society would thus support a sophisticated, critical, and inclusive public sphere; (2) the knowledge economy, competitiveness, and choice: in a market economy increasingly based on information, often in a complex and mediated form, a media-literate individual is likely to have more to offer and so achieve at a higher level in the workplace, and a media-literate society would be innovative and competitive, 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, media literacy contributes to the critical and expressive skills that support a full and meaningful life, and to an informed, creative, and ethical society.

These goals may seem uncontentious. However, significant differences of opinion persist, for example, 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, 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” (Luke 1989).

THE CHANGING NATURE OF MEDIA LITERACY

Thus far, most media literacy research has been conducted on broadcast media, and as yet very little exists for new media (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. 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.

By contrast with print literacy research, which has always balanced the study of reading with the study of writing, media literacy research has paid more attention to questions of access, selection, and understanding than it has to the creation of content, since opportunities to create broadcast or printed content have been severely limited for ordinary people. In the changing 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 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 future media literacy research.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Advertising ▶ Aesthetics ▶ Audience ▶ Branding ▶ Cartoons ▶ Communication and Law ▶ Communication Skills across the Life-Span ▶ Critical Theory ▶ Cultivation Effects ▶ European Union: Communication Law ▶ Fantasy–Reality Distinction ▶ Health Literacy ▶ Information Literacy ▶ Internet ▶ News

► Public ► Realism ► Rhetoric and Orality-Literacy Theorems ► Stereotypes ► Television ► Uses and Gratifications

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