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ABSTRACT
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literacy in order to make sense of this growing yet fragmentary movement and
to organize the widely varied literature by the locus, objectives, and depth
of the initiative. Much of this movement involves what educators choose to
teach their students about media literacy. A critical assessment of the
literature, theoretical links, and application to health messages are
provided and will point to opportunities and challenges that can be met
through healthy skepticism and a healthy dose of theory. (Contains 35
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Media Literacy:

A Review and Critical Assessment of its Diverse Literature

Stefne Lenzmeier Broz

The Ohio State University

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Abstract

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Media Literacy:

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Introduction

Research in media effects has reflected varying conceptions of the audience over time. From the hypodermic needle viewpoint, which posited that the audience consists of homogeneous, passive recipients of mediated information, to the more pluralistic conception of multiple audiences actively selecting messages to which to attend and strategies about how to do so, fear about what impact the mass media might be having upon those audiences has remained a significant area of concern. Effects can include children learning aggression or violence through modeling the behavior they see, to being frightened by scary images or plots, to being manipulated by the commercialism that pervades the mass media, to learning stereotypes and the dominant ideology over other, alternate ones. Over recent decades, a movement (if such a multifaceted concept may be referred to singularly) has begun to attempt to counteract the negative effects of the mass media. *Media literacy*, the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993), constitutes a growing effort that seeks to mitigate these effects. This movement also has the ability to go beyond buffering the effects of media and emphasize critical appreciation of it as well, but the focus of this paper will be on the former, because this paper is written from a public health perspective.

This movement, at first, sought to maintain high culture (or "true" art) by teaching appreciation for it and showing students how to resist and avoid low or "popular" culture. As it has evolved, it has taken on more of an agenda of social change, aimed at empowering individuals to be more active and informed consumers of the mass media. This paper will argue that the multifaceted nature of the movement is both its major strength and its fundamental weakness. The potential of the movement lies in making its content relevant and useful, and this paper explores both issues, among others. First, exploring the various assumptions about the mass media that media literacy makes, as well as how the movement has developed from its earliest inception in the 1930s in Great Britain,

provides a foundation for understanding the various conceptions of the movement and places it in historical context. An attempt will be made to organize the various approaches in terms of content and intended outcomes, and the biggest questions that loom within the movement as it attempts to gain legitimacy and support in the United States will be considered. Next, a review and critical assessment of the most relevant literature will move the discussion from general to specific and include consideration of issues related to its theoretical coherence, the methods used, measurement techniques, and finally, some results that demonstrate the strength and shortcomings of this approach. Applications of media literacy to health-related messages will be considered, and lastly, we will consider the opposition and problems it faces. Concluding remarks will include a current assessment of the literature and directions for future research.

Assumptions

It is first necessary to outline some of the assumptions that media literacy makes about the mass media, because without them one might question the necessity of the movement itself. Aufderheide (1993) lists several concepts that should be included in the analysis of messages, which for our purposes translate into some of the assumptions that need to be acknowledged. They include:

1. Media messages are constructed;
2. Media messages are produced within economic, social, political, historical, and aesthetic contexts;
3. The interpretive meaning-making process involved in message reception consists of an interaction between the reader, the text and the culture;
4. Media have unique "languages," characteristics which typify various forms, genres, and symbol systems of communication;
5. Media representations play a role in people's understanding of social reality (p.2).

Implicit in the last concept is the notion that media have some sort of effect on people. For this paper, I would point to the research to date (e.g., Bandura's Social Learning Theory) that has established the power of the media to model certain behaviors that are subsequently imitated by viewers; it is worth noting that effects like these tend to be stronger for negative behaviors than pro-social ones. Further discussion of specific applications like these will be provided below.

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Development

The development of media literacy can be traced through several broad mindsets that have occurred and shifted over the decades, and the assumptions described above will be evident in most. Such a background will provide the major ideas that drove certain conceptualizations, and vestiges of these will be evident as we discuss various other characteristics throughout the remainder of this paper. It is important to note that the United States lags behind many other English-speaking countries in terms of media literacy's progression, and the reasons for this will be discussed in the section below that addresses the problems facing this movement. While the various forms that media literacy has taken on in the U.S. probably collectively represent all stages of its development, these stages are discussed in the order in which they were in operation in the U.K. because it originated there.

The earliest conceptualization of media literacy can be traced back to a book entitled, Culture and environment: The training of critical awareness (Leavis & Thompson, 1933). The approach that was promoted therein taught students to "discriminate" between worthy and unworthy media artifacts and "resist" the less enriching, resulting in a preservation of literary heritage and other forms of high culture. As Buckingham (1998) puts it, Leavis and Thompson (1933) "sought to enable teachers to expose what they saw as the crude manipulativeness and cheap emotional falsity of popular culture" (p.34). Later critics referred to this as "inoculation" (Halloran & Jones, 1968; Masterman, 1980) because of its simplistic and protectionist approach.

The next phase began in the 1950s and 60s when the approach to "culture" within media literacy efforts began to be recognized not as an elite literary canon but rather as a way of life that surrounds us all the time. Hall and Whannel's (1964) The popular arts instructed teachers how to introduce film into the classroom to explore cultural expression, but their approach still preserved the discriminatory flavor of its predecessor by failing to include the far more popular medium of the day, television. Nevertheless, cultural studies expanded the artifacts of study to include many more forms of expression than before.

Screen Theory, developed in the 1970s, was a response to what Masterman (1980, 1985) considered to be the class-based, evaluative approach of Leavis and his followers. Also called "demystification," this phase promoted semiotic methods that could provide objectivity and more rigorous analysis. Students were taught analysis that would "expose the 'hidden' ideologies of media texts, and thereby 'liberate' themselves from their influence" (Buckingham, 1998, p.35). As with the previous two phases, this approach assumed that the audience is passive and vulnerable to influence, and that media exert powerful effects that are difficult to resist. Given this vulnerability, especially among children, it was necessary to arm people with the knowledge and skills to deconstruct the messages.

More recent developments have emphasized either a democratization or a defensiveness approach. Democratization is the process whereby students' out-of-school cultures are gradually recognized as valid and worthy of consideration in the school curriculum (Buckingham, 1998). This approach does not seek to impose the values of the dominant culture, as many argued that the earlier discrimination approach did, but rather it presents a direct challenge to the hegemony of the elite literary culture that Leavis tried to preserve. This approach takes into account students' own sense-making and seeks to achieve media literacy via reflection by the viewers themselves, rather than by imposing a set of "facts" (as was evident in the demystification approach).

Defensiveness is a process whereby teachers have sought to inoculate or protect students against what are assumed to be the negative effects of media (Buckingham, 1998). This language is reminiscent of Leavis, but unlike his emphasis on rejecting low culture, this inoculation is against the negative influences of media. In this sense, teaching children about media is thought to empower them to resist, not low cultural artifacts, but the less desirable attitudes and behaviors that media often promote.

Variations in Content and Outcomes

Variations on each of these latter two abound in current media literacy curricula, and it is possible to consider all potential elements of media literacy as modular, enabling educators to pick and

choose from among them in constructing an approach. The following discussion on variations in the content of media literacy programs should help elucidate how the preceding mindsets play specific roles in what children are being taught.

There are various ways to approach media literacy, and this discussion of the variations on content, or mutations, that exist within the broad heading of media literacy shows that the variety of emphases necessarily produces a variety of different strategies and processes to achieve them. Included here will be a discussion on how various theorists and researchers conceptualize media literacy and the focus or foci it should include. Message-focused curriculum, production-focused instruction, and institution-focused education will be highlighted as rough categories for considering the variations on content of media literacy. Within each of these, examples of the various types of media messages to which they may be applied will be presented. Following this discussion will be a consideration of how such content is related to various intended outcomes.

Message-focused curriculum. First, message-focused curriculum emphasizes the text itself: what it contains, how frequently certain images appear, and what other alternatives might exist for what occurred in the message. Attempts to decrease unwanted negative effects might also include asking students to evaluate how realistic the portrayals are, how similar the people are to themselves or people they actually know, and how much they can identify with the people or situations involved. Recent research on media literacy initiatives suggests that discussing how the messages produce distorted reflections of reality can serve to distance the viewer from associations they might otherwise make if not prepared ahead of time (Austin & Johnson, 1997a). The authors argue that "significant adults such as parents and teachers may be able to help children see television messages such as alcohol ads as less relevant, useful, realistic, and rewarding" (p.20).

Examples of the textual approach include raising surface-level issues, such as the race and gender of the perpetrators and victims in violent programming, or the juxtaposition of alcohol and good times in advertisements. Message-level analysis might also go further to examine what

stereotypical race- or gender-related portrayals are present in a particular situation comedy, for example, and perhaps what functions they serve or what effects they may have.

Production-based education. Second, production-based education encompasses both the skills necessary to create mediated messages, as well as instruction in how the tools of production influence the messages we receive. The former can range from a simple assignment that requires a group of students to create a short film or advertisement to lessons that encourage students to actively fight against stereotypical media images by constructing their own images of themselves, as was successfully done by a group of Arab-American students in Chicago (Bing-Can & Zerkel, 1998). Recent research emphasizes the potential of public access and community television for social action and empowerment (Higgins, 1999; King & Mele, 1999). Higgins (1999) concluded that participation in the creation of television programs in such public venues enables people to become more discriminating viewers and provides them with a foundation upon which they might build an effort to impact the broader society, starting with the changed perceptions of those involved in the production process. King and Mele (1999) argue that their study of public access television production demonstrates that the experience can yield benefits such as "mastering technology, getting a message across, tolerating others' views, creating community, and making a difference in people's lives" (p.621). The changes can start on a personal level and move outward as the message is received by others and gains ground against dominant messages. When it is made part of the curriculum as a required assignment, however, its effects may never be internalized by the creators.

The other side of production includes teaching about any of the variables that factor into mass media production, such as strategic use of lighting, sound, a particular genre, or the context surrounding the message. Zettl (1998) argues that "contextual media aesthetics is the necessary foundation of media literacy and . . . we need to know how the basic aesthetic building blocks are used to create and shape our cognitive and affective mental maps" (p.81). In this sense, exploring aesthetic techniques and elements is pre-contextual; Zettl (1998) argues that they must be understood before any textual analysis. His media literacy model contains four levels, the last of which is textual analysis

like that described above. In describing each, he demonstrates how the textual analysis would have provided a less rich meaning had the levels before it been skipped.

Examples of the ways in which production-based media literacy initiatives might be applied include examining advertisements. Zettl (1998) argues that many of the production techniques that are used are directly routed to our affective maps, preventing us from thinking much about them, and making the message that much more persuasive. He provides an example of a commercial for a cereal that includes a free toy car in the box. The commercial leads the child to think it is much larger than it is, by having the toy turn into a real car that makes real sounds. The all-too-familiar disappointment that results from finding a three-inch-long car in that box of cereal, once the child has convinced the parent to buy it, is related to the techniques of message production and the expectations they created. Going beyond textual analysis to ask not only what is in the message, but how it is portrayed via production techniques is the goal of this approach.

Contextual approach. Finally, media literacy can go beyond the message itself and the methods of production to focus on institutional issues, or take a contextual approach. As Lewis and Jhally (1998) argue, "media literacy should be about helping people to become sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers" (p.109), and to do this it is necessary to understand messages within the institutional, cultural and economic conditions in which messages are produced. While a textual analysis is helpful, it is incomplete without taking into account the conventions and biases of the producers of those messages. Accustomed as we are to commercially-run media, they are not the norm in most of the rest of the world. However, by placing the focus at the message level, the motives, interests, and power relations of the agents are never really considered, and it is assumed that the way things are is the way they naturally ought to be. Lewis and Jhally (1998) note, "it is difficult to propose changes to a system that is regarded as both inevitable and ubiquitous, and . . . it could be argued that one of the successes of commercial broadcasting in the U.S. has been persuading Americans that there is no alternative" (p.113). Alternatives, such as community and public access television, will be discussed below, but for now it is important to understand that it is change that is

the desired outcome, at least in the way students might begin to question the sources of the messages they receive.

Critical analysis at the contextual level helps elucidate deeper media issues, Lewis and Jhally (1998) argue, such as why car manufacturers invariably show their cars on an open road in a beautiful countryside. Going beyond textual analysis (what does this message contain) and production issues (how is the car portrayed in terms of color, size, etc.), this approach would also ask what is being left out of these advertisements (e.g., pollution, traffic, smog) and why? They acknowledge that cynicism in itself is not a productive outcome, but at least if media literacy initiatives that emphasize the contextual factors can produce skepticism or more directed cynicism, students can question why things are portrayed the way they are.

Organizing Media Literacy Approaches

By looking at much of the most relevant research in this area, I have developed a set of loose categories for considering how content varies depending on the intended outcome. These categories are necessarily imperfect and are not exhaustive, given the plethora of variations on the theme of media literacy, but they represent an attempt at understanding broad similarities and differences between approaches. The modular nature, in fact, suggests that any components of any category could be grouped with other components, and the components themselves could be divided along many different lines. Therefore, overlap between them is inevitable, given the necessity of choosing one particular categorization strategy. It should be possible to recognize where the variations on content described above may fit in these approaches. The categories are oriented around expected outcomes, and they are ordered from most superficial to most activist. The depth in most cases depend on the locus, so they are considered here as parent-oriented, teacher-oriented, student-oriented, or society-oriented.

Parent-oriented media literacy. First, the narrowest conception of media literacy can be found in advice to parents, and it emphasizes behavioral outcomes. Shaughnessy, Stanley, and Siegel (1994), for example, offer suggestions for parents who are interested in helping their children become

more television literate. They include monitoring their children's viewing habits, acting as role models by only watching educationally redeeming programs, discussing what they have watched with their children (also known as *coviewing*), installing electronic aides to help control viewing habits (e.g., "locking out" certain channels), and holding meetings to decide what will be watched.

While these strategies may help counteract the negative effects of the mass media, they focus on behaviors that affect exposure levels, and many would argue that such a surface-level approach does not at all constitute "literacy." Responsible viewing is not synonymous with being literate in the components, techniques, or intentions that the messages have. Certainly these types of approaches deserve attention and have been shown to be effective in reducing the negative effects of media, but I would argue that they do not and should not constitute media literacy. The depth of the discussions that might ensue during coviewing might lead to greater literacy, provided that the parent can "deconstruct" the message or talk about its inappropriateness. However, mere restrictions on behavior do not promote literacy in any way other than communicating to the children that certain programs are inappropriate for them.

Teacher-oriented. The teacher-centered approach is classroom-based, and it includes a focus on mass media messages. It is consistent with the defensiveness paradigm described above, in which teachers educate students about the messages, their components, and their construction. The intended outcome is to provide the students with a defense mechanism that buffers the effects that messages may have on them. In this approach, the conversation is mostly one-way, and the teacher explains the various mechanisms of mass media. Topics might include focusing on the text (the message itself) or the aesthetics of production techniques, which Zettl (1998) argues is essential before looking at the message to establish context and determine the effects of certain ways of presenting any given messages. Teaching students how to produce their own messages is another possible component in the teacher-centered approach. Whatever form the curriculum might take, the emphasis is on conveying the "secrets" of the trade, or demystifying media messages to counteract their potentially negative effects.

This approach has been criticized for its reliance on the teacher as expert, which can encourage students to repeat the "right" answers back to the teacher, without any real critical evaluation of the messages or internalization of the material that was taught. These critiques will be revisited below within the discussion on protectionism, but I also found it odd that critics of the teacher-oriented approach do not seem to acknowledge that it may have a place in educating very young students. Expecting a six-year-old to consider the deeper meaning of their own experiences with the media and how their exposure reflects the dominant ideology might be asking too much, and teacher-centered approaches may be more appropriate at this level, thereby paving the way for more student-originated critiques later on.

Student-oriented. The student-centered approach may also include some of the specific topic areas described above, but here the emphasis is on what sort of expertise the students might bring to the critical activity. Rather than a teacher-as-expert model, this approach promotes more of a teamwork approach in which teacher and students together may critique messages (or aesthetic variables, or production processes, or contextual cues, or institutional/hegemonic influences, etc.) based on their own experience with them, guided by a curriculum that encourages critical thinking, rather than providing acceptable answers. Intended outcomes would include promoting such critical thinking toward the greater end of producing more critical consumers, rather than informed ones.

This also implies that the subject matter would consist at least partially of popular culture texts, so that the students have an opportunity to be experts. This approach validates their experience, not only by asking about it, but also by focusing on the texts with which they would have had experience. The term "postmodern" is not out of place here, as it emphasizes the plurality of experiences and interpretations, while still focusing on being critical.

I would argue that because the process of deconstructing the text (or whatever other aim the curriculum might have) is more internalized in this approach, the effects will also stay with the students. By interacting more with the texts that are relevant to their lives, students might be better able to actually change their attitudes toward the things they experience via the mass media, rather

than simply becoming more informed. Recognizing gender role stereotypes, for example, is one way of interacting more with the text than the demystification approach. This example runs the risk of overly-politicizing the media literacy curriculum (e.g., merely pushing "politically correct" viewpoints), and its critics will be heard in the next section on society-oriented approaches.

Society-centered. Finally, the society-centered approach seeks the outcomes that were described above in the discussion of institutional or contextual criticism. With the content that Lewis and Jhally (1998) propose, the intended outcomes are questioning the dominant system of power relations, motives behind messages, and what the agents have to gain by constructing messages as they do. This questioning has a component of activism, and aims for broader social change resulting from empowering students to question. This in turn can motivate them to take an active role in changing institutions and making them more democratic by enabling more to participate. As suggested in the example of the car advertisement, what is missing is perhaps more important than what is included, and this same logic asks who is not being heard and what can be done to make them heard?

Interestingly enough, one of the critiques of the political-ideological components of this approach is similar to that of the teacher-oriented approach in its concern that students may only exhibit surface-level changes. Buckingham (1998) warns that:

> Students may respond to the propagandist approach of . . . teachers in one of two ways. Either they will choose to play the game in which case they may learn to reproduce the "politically correct" responses without necessarily investigating or questioning their own position. Or they will refuse to do so, in which case they will say things they may or may not believe, in order to annoy the teacher and thereby amuse themselves. (p.290)

Buckingham's (1993; 1998) point is that there is often little opportunity for students to generate their own meanings when media literacy efforts are put into practice. The intention may be there, but the risk is that, "in practice, critical analysis can often become little more than an exercise in guessing what is in the teacher's mind" (p.147). It is necessary to ensure that students do in fact have a chance to develop their own defensible conclusions.

<u>Seven Great Debates about Media Literacy</u>

One of the reasons for such wide variation in the content of media literacy is the lack of agreement about its scope, or what larger issues should be addressed through it. The next section of the paper addresses the "Seven Great Debates about Media Literacy" (Hobbs, 1998) to demonstrate that this movement is still in its infancy. Regardless of the specific approach to media literacy that is taken, there are issues that apply to any potential media literacy project.

Should media literacy education aim to protect children and young people from negative media influences? This first debate in some respects centers around whether or not media have harmful effects, although there is general agreement that there is at least the potential for negative effects, depending on the level of identification with characters, level of ongoing exposure, and other variables which space does not allow us to explore here. There is some evidence the media literacy training can affect children's decision-making about alcohol (Austin & Johnson, 1997), but even if it is possible to protect children from harmful effects through such training, much of the opposition that has emerged is on pedagogical grounds. Hobbs (1998) notes that many teachers at both the K-12 and university levels have found that "students are unresponsive to the idea that they are helpless victims of media influence who need to be rescued from the excesses and evils of their interest in popular culture" (p.19). Too often, Buckingham (1993) argues, the protectionist approach results in an instructor-focused classroom, in which the teacher tells the "facts" about media's negative influence and the students' engagement with the media is ignored. Such an approach may defeat the purpose of true literacy in that it encourages students to regurgitate the "correct" interpretations and answers rather than reflecting on how their own experiences might make them experts as well (Buckingham, 1990; Masterman, 1985; Williamson, 1981). While pedagogical concerns are beyond the scope of this paper, acknowledging its place as an important issue is useful before considering the critique in the following sections. Furthermore, some of the pedagogical issues hinted at in this particular question are inextricably linked to theoretical concerns, which are addressed in this paper, such as whether there

are negative effects from which children should be protected, and whether such negative effects can be reduced through media literacy efforts.

Should media production be an essential feature of media literacy education? While many approaches acknowledge the need to teach about production techniques as a fundamental step toward becoming media literate, this question focuses on whether students should also be allowed to produce their own messages. Goodman (1996) writes, "the power of technology is unleashed when students can use it in their own hands as authors of their own work and use it for critical inquiry, self-reflection and creative expression" (p.2). Indeed, models in the U.K. and Canada include such experience, but in the U.S., Grahame (1991) notes that many educators, scholars and parents have wondered what students are actually learning when they create their own messages. "The great risk with practical work . . . is that students will simply learn to ape the professionals, and that a critical, analytical perspective will be lost (Stafford, 1990, p.81). Hobbs (1998) notes that often media production is reserved for low-ability students, and this suggests a bias that may prevent truly effective production curriculum.

Should media literacy focus on popular culture texts? As discussed above in the development of the media literacy movement, early models taught discrimination between high and low culture texts. However, the very fact that students are immersed in popular culture texts may make them all the more suitable for exploration. Their use also has the potential to shift the discussion away from the teacher-as-expert dilemma explored above, to an environment in which "the texts of everyday life, when constituted as objects of social knowledge, provide the possibility for combining textual, historical, and ideological analyses in ways that help students and teachers move beyond the limits of traditional disciplines and subject areas"(Hobbs, 1998, p.21). As suggested earlier, relevance seems to be a significant factor affecting reception of media literacy efforts and whether students will be interested. It follows, then, that the texts that are most relevant to their lives should be included. Especially if the focus is on mitigating negative effects, then one might wonder why we would focus

on anything else, since popular media are wrought with potentially harmful material (as the argument

goes).

Should media literacy have a more explicit political and ideological agenda? Hobbs (1998)

notes that media literacy has the potential to serve as a vehicle for achieving various political ends,

such as promoting social changes in students' attitudes toward sexism, racism and violence, as well as

questioning the use of commercial media within schools (i.e., Channel One) and encouraging the use

of local access television. As has been described above, media literacy can promote exploration of

power, motives, interests and objectives that surround message production and consumption that could

result in "meaningful political and social action" (Hobbs, 1998, p.22). However, because of the

tenuous hold that media literacy projects currently have in many schools, there is not a clear

connection between course material and actual potential for social change. The postmodern

characteristics such an approach has, however, remain intact. Scholes (1987) explains that because

media literacy emphasizes questioning media texts, it represents an opportunity for students to

"disrupt" the text through alternative interpretations. Students are invited to consider the possibility

that the rampant commercialism of our media in this country is not the only way it could have been

(and in fact, in most other countries, is not the way it is).

Should media literacy be focused on school-based K-12 educational environments? Some

approaches to media literacy, such as coviewing questionable content in television programs, have

been advocated more in the home than as part of the school's responsibility. However, the potential to

reach large numbers of youth at critical times in their lives is significant through school-based

programs. Although Hobbs (1998) acknowledges that "the diversity of purposes, goals, and outcomes

for media literacy education naturally limits the effectiveness of work in schools" (p.23), she also

points out the potential for the individual efforts on the part of individual teachers who see a need and

attempt to meet it and refers to this progress from the bottom up as being "an important source of

energy" for the movement (p.24). The number of emerging programs seems to suggest that this

environment is suitable, but there are also examples of media literacy efforts in post-secondary institutions (Wulff, 1997).

Should media literacy be taught as a specialist subject or integrated within the context of existing subjects? Relevance is a major issue here again, but this time it is coupled with the question of resources, especially time and training. Hobbs (1998) notes that developing a separate course in media literacy may make it disconnected from the everyday experiences of the students, as well as make them question the legitimacy of it as a new piece of curriculum. Integration into existing courses offers the potential of making the material relevant in many varied ways, and demonstrates its relevance to many aspects of students' lives. The latter approach also provides necessary reinforcement across the curriculum, without which students might be tempted to compartmentalize the material and only access it when they are in their media literacy class.

The drawback of integration, however, is that it requires all, or at least most, teachers to be media-literacy literate. We have already noted many of the inadequacies that even the strongest approaches manifest in practice, and media literacy efforts done poorly can be worse than no effort at all in terms of delegitimizing an already doubtful curriculum. Much as technophobes tremble at the thought of having to integrate technology into the classroom when they themselves are not proficient, so would the media literaphobes fear having to discuss deeper issues of meaning and message construction when they have not taken much time to consider them for themselves and have no support or training (the latter concern is explored further below as a major problem facing this movement).

Should media literacy initiatives be supported financially by media organizations? Just as alcohol advertisements fulfill some of their social responsibility by encouraging drinking in moderation, so too can media firms help people develop critical consumption skills for thinking about media messages. Several efforts exist, such as the Cable in the Classroom, provided by the Newspaper Association of America Foundation, which frequently highlights media literacy efforts by teachers. However, critics of this involvement suggest that the industry is taking advantage of

underfunded educational institutions who will jump at anything that is free, providing their own biased slant on media messages, and, as Hobbs (1998) puts it, "co-opting the media literacy movement and softening it to make sure that public criticism of the media never gets too loud, abrasive or strident" (p.26; Cowrie, 1995; Montgomery, 1997). Media organizations' financial involvement in media literacy initiatives may be a mixed blessing.

With these debates in mind, and considering the various approaches discussed thus far, we can now explore the characteristics of media literacy to evaluate its strength as a movement and its potential for real, positive change. Here we will consider its theoretical coherence, the methods used in teaching it, how media literacy campaigns are evaluated, the magnitude of the results that have been obtained to date, and the implications these issues have for health-related attitudes and behaviors.

Linking Media Literacy and Theory

As demonstrated in the seven debates discussed above, there is a lack of consensus about what constitutes media literacy, and therefore its theoretical bases. It is possible, however, to establish a connection between media literacy initiatives and various theories of media effects. As was mentioned earlier, research on media effects has reflected various conceptions of the audience over time, from the passive, singular audience to the more active multiple audiences. Likewise, it is possible to see the connections between the direct-stimulus (hypodermic needle) theories and the resulting approach that media literacy emphasized, as discussed above.

From there, an approach based on uses and gratifications theory became more relevant as the audience began to be conceived as more active. What people do with media, rather than what it does to them, seems more suitable for an audience (or audiences) that makes active decisions about what it sees. Therefore, media literacy can gain theoretical strength from this more or less established and accepted theory of media usage and effects. Based on this theory, media literacy gains legitimacy as well, for if audiences are already doing things with what they see, it seems logical to assume we might gain advantages from helping them do those things more effectively or with better outcomes. I would argue that this theoretical basis seems more plausible that the conception of the audience as being

injected with the message, because the latter raises doubt about the efficacy of media literacy training to counteract the negative effects that might occur. If it's injected into their brains, there's no chance of stopping it. I would argue, therefore, that media literacy's theoretical basis is strengthened by the more active conception of the audience and this accompanying approach of uses and gratifications.

It is also possible to see vestiges of cultivation theory, cultural studies and semiotics, as media literacy expands to focus on symbols, images and myths in mass media texts. According to cultivation theory, which comes from Gerbner's work with the Cultural Indicators project, how media tell stories has implications for the way we perceive reality, as is the case with heavy television viewers who believe crime is more rampant than it as, compared to the perceptions of light viewers. These stories, as well as looking at how media texts "mean," are sources rich in material for consideration within the context of media literacy projects.

Finally, some of the stronger, more activist variations of media literacy also draw from Marxist theory in suggesting that hegemony and ideology are forces that drive the media. This theoretical basis is consistent with Lewis and Jhally (1998), who have been described in this paper as representing the contextual approach to understanding media texts as products of power relations, interests, motives, and economics.

Because it can draw on the strength of existing theories as it mutates and takes on new forms, concerns and foci, media literacy seems well-grounded. Certainly the lack of consensus about what constitutes media literacy and what should be emphasized means that a unified theory that media literacy can call its own is not in sight. However, in the meantime, various theorists have chosen their connections and they seem to provide coherent theoretical bases for this emerging, seemingly ever-changing movement.

Implementing and Evaluating Media Literacy Initiatives

The next area we must consider is how media literacy may be implemented. As discussed above in the seven debates in media literacy, there are two basic options: integration into existing

subject matter and teaching it as a specialist subject. While the previous discussion should prove adequate for understanding these options, it is worth noting an example of each. Wulff (1997) describes the integration of media literacy objectives across the curriculum at Alverno College, a small, urban, Catholic, liberal arts college for women in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. While assessment is conspicuous by its absence, she does provide outlines of how the curriculum has been integrated and notes that "media literacy is considered as important as other abilities that students are required to demonstrate across the curriculum" (p.136). The approach includes four levels, which roughly mirror the increasingly complex categories described above and including both using and understanding media.

Austin and Johnson's (1997a, 1997b) studies are examples of special one-time interventions that enjoyed some success in mitigating the effects that advertising had on children, but they acknowledge that a one-time approach will not show sustained results. Their research was designed to test the feasibility of an approach that might later be implemented on a more ongoing basis. Still, it may successfully remain a separate subject as it gains legitimacy in its own right, rather than relying on its application to other relevant elements of the curriculum for survival.

Once implemented, it is imperative that media literacy efforts be evaluated. As with any public health campaign, and media literacy may be considered one in its efforts to minimize unhealthy behaviors, formative, process and outcome evaluations are key to lending empirical rigor, as well as legitimacy, and prove essential when it comes to requesting funding. It is difficult to evaluate assessments of media literacy campaigns because of the lack of consensus about what media literacy should accomplish and because of widespread disagreement about how it is possible to tell whether the objectives were in fact accomplished.

Studies may note, for example, that students learned or remembered the material they were taught when they were asked three months after the intervention, but what constitutes "learning"? As I have mentioned before, there is a concern that such effects are only surface-level and they do not constitute real changes in attitudes or behaviors. Does media literacy involve skills, knowledge,

behaviors, attitudes, affect, or values? Or, does it involve a combination of these? The lack of empirical studies that specify an objective and attempt to measure it post-intervention is to be expected in a fragmented and relatively young movement (in this country, at least).

We can look to very few recent studies for a glimpse at what some researchers use to measure the effectiveness of an intervention. Austin and Johnson (1997a, 1997b) conducted research with third-graders to determine how alcohol advertisements and subsequent discussion might affect their decision-making behavior with regards to alcohol. However, because of the sensitive nature of the products and the age of the participants, decision-making behavior was measured via preference for other products (beach balls, toy trucks, t-shirts, etc.) that either had the name of a popular soda or a beer on them. Success of the programs was determined by whether students liked the Budweiser beach towel or the Coke beach towel better. While their study represents an empirically rigorous look at the effects of an intervention that is also sensitive to the age of the participants, it might be argued that such "preferences" suffer from a plethora of potentially confounding variables. For example, a child may select the t-shirt with the beer on it because it has a prettier design on it, rather than because s/he has been swayed by the ad. It is clear that walking the fine line between offending parents' sensibilities and using methods that ensure validity is a true challenge for media literacy researchers.

In the absence of a significant body of research that shares enough in common to facilitate a critique in terms of how media literacy efforts are evaluated, I will argue that such evaluation should focus on deeper, more genuine changes in students' behaviors, rather than their ability to use the proper terminology or voice the correct opinions when the opportunity arises. Surface-level objectives (i.e., content-related, such as why a particular scene is chosen for a commercial) may be more relevant for the youngest audiences, but educators need to make sure that such approaches do not make students impervious to later, more in-depth interventions.

The few results that have been published to date indicate that media literacy has potential. Sprafkin, Watkins and Gadow (1991) attempted to distance students from the characters in television shows in order to reduce the likelihood that they would model their violent behavior. They found that

students who were exposed to the intervention identified significantly less with aggressive characters than did the control group. They also performed better on post-tests and follow-ups that investigated their understanding of reality versus fantasy portrayals, knowledge of special effects and the veracity of commercial messages. These results suggest that it is possible to distance students from potential effects by targeting the factors that are most likely to lead to those effects, such as how closely the viewer identifies with the violent character. Other research in this area emphasized similar objectives.

Austin and Johnson (1997a, 1997b) found significant effects from their intervention, even three months later. However, they note a tendency for effects to decay over time, in many cases reaching the same level as pre-intervention. Furthermore, some of their results indicate an *increase* in preference for the products the ads showed, and the explanation they offer is that the intervention minimized the extent to which preferences increased following exposure to the ad. While this is better than unrestrained increases in preference for alcohol, it is still somewhat disturbing. Their point, however, is that the intervention succeeded in distancing the students from the ads by reducing their level of identification with them, their expectancies associated with the product and perceived similarity that students experienced with regard to the ads – factors that can predict the amount of behavioral impact an ad may have. Furthermore, they argue that an understanding of persuasive intent, which was successfully taught, understood and remembered in their intervention, is one of the "most critical variables in the process" of media effects (p.36).

Given these results, although there are as of yet few other examples, it seems plausible to conclude that there is potential for media literacy. Unfortunately, even the literature that serves as an historical review of the trajectories media literacy has taken does not address the magnitude of the results obtained to date, much less even mention that such results are available. Brown (1993, 1998) discusses the results of his own research, which assess the process of media literacy training itself, and the issues he raises have been presented throughout this paper. Briefly, he warns of the lack of results, or even negative outcomes, of a surface-level approach to critiquing media.

Application of Media Literacy to Health-Related Messages

Thus far, media literacy has been broadly construed as applying to any sort of media messages, but it is useful to consider what implications this approach has for health messages because of the unique problems and challenges that exist in this context, because health-related messages are an important domain in media literacy initiatives, and because of my own interest in health campaigns. Yates (1997) provides a health education perspective within the context of media literacy composed of ideas for lesson plans, drawn mostly from other sources. It is unfortunate that there is no assessment of any of the ideas, but it seems useful to mention them here in order to further demonstrate the potential that media literacy has for health behaviors.

Yates (1997) focuses on five areas of health issues, and I will outline his and my comments that are related to four of them briefly here. First, nutrition might be addressed both in terms of ads for food products that are not healthy and in terms of unrealistic body images in ads and programs. Interventions might include assessing the actual nutritional value of what one's favorite character eats and drawing conclusions about why they may not be healthy, or asking students to evaluate how realistic certain portrayals of body images are.

Second, sexual behaviors and information constitute an area of health concern. From portrayals of sexually active characters as role models to the failure to show the consequences of the actions taken by those characters, there is a potential for intervention in the form of frank discussion about the choices that characters make and what their alternatives might be. This is especially important, given findings that messages about topics for which children have little or no access to information from other sources tend to have more influence (Miller & Reese, 1982; Rosengren & Windahl, 1972).

Third, Yates (1997) considers alcohol and tobacco advertisements as fertile ground for progress through media literacy efforts. The juxtaposition of these products with "good times" and the false norms it creates are topics that could be considered critically in the classroom. Such deconstruction might allow students to recognize purposive communication so that they can remove

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themselves somewhat from the effects. Also, media production in the form of constructing persuasive posters that advertise the negative effects of these products is a good way to put the same strategies used by the media to work for the good of public health.

Fourth, violence as a health risk is also considered, and it can be discussed in terms of whether or not it is justified, who the victims are, and what alternatives to physical conflict might exist. The much-researched effect of media violence as portraying violence as an acceptable and normal means of conflict resolution may be mitigated through exploration of realistic alternatives. Coviewing might also be considered a form of media literacy, and parents may be able to share some of the burden by talking about the violence that they and their children witness together.

Problems with and Challenges for Media Literacy

There are a number of problems and sources of opposition to media literacy, and it is necessary to consider them here to provide a well-rounded discussion. I have already alluded to several of them, including a concern that students will not be interested when they may not believe they are vulnerable to media effects. A tendency to "teach the facts" rather than allow for multiple, personal, defensible readings is another problem the movement faces. While such an approach is arguably easier on the teacher, it may simply result in regurgitation of what the teacher has said is the right answer without enabling true questioning, criticism and evaluation on the part of the students. Clearly, there need to be some educational objectives, but training would help teachers achieve them with less imposition of the "right" answers. First, the students' own sense-making must be taken into account, for as Anderson and Meyer (1988) argue, "meaning is in the situated individual, not content" (p.192). Second, an interactionist approach, which studies the interaction between audience members and the medium, as well as interaction with peers and the surrounding viewing context, is what Brown (1998) considers to be most effective in identifying and combatting a medium's impact.

A third problem is the constraints that the school context possesses, such as limited funding, faculty, and class time for additional ventures. Related to this is the lack of infrastructure for training teachers and showing them how to successfully implement media literacy initiatives, even on a limited

budget. In part these are due to a lack of consensus about what constitutes media literacy, but they are also a function of the relative youth of the movement and the multiplicity of approaches that characterize this youth.

<u>Other Issues – What Has Not Been Said</u>

Finally, there are several issues that must be raised before drawing some general conclusions. They address what researchers have *not* said on the subject of media literacy, and what seem to me to constitute serious issues. I argue that beyond the positive results of increased immunity to messages and better knowledge of how messages can manipulate viewers lie some more philosophical concerns that have not surfaced in the literature. This discussion does not provide definitive answers, but instead attempts to raise some questions that have occurred to me that may or may not need to be addressed as the movement spreads; specifically, I will address three objections I have to the media literacy movement.

First, I argue that media literacy's approach to messages as propaganda also contains elements that could be considered propagandistic. There is the complaint that media messages tell us what to think, but in a sense that is what many media literacy efforts do as well. We are instead telling students what to think about the media. We could frame media literacy in terms of our own fundamental human weaknesses, rather than place the blame on the evil media empire. We need not put a value judgment on the media in order to work toward averting their effects. Certainly we have some theoretical and empirical support for the negative effects of various types of media messages, but if we instead put the value judgment on ourselves as weak and susceptible to influence by nature, then we can focus on how to make ourselves stronger *without implying the media are guilty of making us do bad things.* Looking at it this way, the approach toward media as the wrongdoers takes on a bit of propaganda flavoring, and this danger is worth considering, at least at the theoretical or philosophical level. Accusations that this is merely "blaming the victim" misses the point that we can argue for media literacy in terms of us being, by nature, susceptible to influence.

Second, I argue that media literacy, especially when considered as a vehicle for health promotion, can be counter-productive to health messages, and in two distinct ways. The first is the possibility that learning not to be swayed by tobacco advertising (because one is familiar with the techniques used) can transfer to other messages, such as those that promote healthy behavior. A condom ad, for example, that stresses the need for protection, could be dismissed on the same grounds as the arguably more harmful ad that promotes cigarette smoking, since both use strategic constructions that no longer work on the "educated" viewer. This is not a concern of media literacy *per se*, since the objective is to produce educated viewers; however, health message creators need to be aware of the ways in which media literacy training can work both for and against health objectives.

The second way this approach can in fact compromise health messages is mentioned by Austin and Johnson (1997a), although they do not present it in this light. They discuss gender differences among how children respond to media literacy efforts, and they note that because "girls tend to use substances for weight control more than boys do, embracing those that seem to help control weight gain . . . [this had led] message designers to encourage them to avoid alcohol 'because it is fattening'" (p.22). It seems odd to me that the authors do not note the potential harm that could result from such messages by further encouraging girls, who are already at high risk for eating disorders, to pay attention to those things that might be fattening. While this may be an accurate effect of alcohol, emphasizing it in order to reach young girls can have the unintended effect of further emphasizing thinness as a separate and necessary goal.

Finally, I argue that the relativity of evaluating what is "bad" and "good" is somewhat problematic, as it is in many health messages. From one day to the next, sodium might be bad for you, or it might prevent cancer. This week, cholesterol guarantees heart disease, but next week it constitutes a miracle cure for migraines. The uncertainty and ever-evolving state of medical knowledge necessarily makes health-related messages somewhat tenuous. This is not to say that no health messages possess adequate backing, for many do, but rather it raises the question of who decides what is bad? There is general agreement that cigarettes are harmful, so targeting

advertisements of them seems a worthwhile venture for media literacy efforts. However, I might also

be of the opinion that beef is harmful, so I might also include ads from the Beef Council in my media

literacy class in order to show how the institution has duped us into believing that beef is "what's for

dinner" (as if there were no other alternative!). But do I have the right to decide for my students that

beef is bad? What about those ads from the Egg Council? They tell me that I can safely eat an egg a

day with no consequences, but they of course are biased. The question of relativity may not be

insurmountable, but it merits attention. Arguably, there are guidelines (e.g., common sense), but they

may not clearly point the way in all situations.

Conclusions

It is difficult to draw conclusions from such a multifaceted discussion about a movement that

has multiple personalities. I have considered some background information, the largest questions that

exist within the movement today, and some of the research related to the success of media literacy

efforts. I have also had the opportunity to voice my own concerns about the movement. It seems safe

to conclude that media literacy has a lot of potential as a movement. It also seems accurate to suggest

that, no matter how much instructors may be warned of the dangers of surface-level approaches that

teach the "right" answer and ask students to repeat those answers back, there will always be examples

of this type of approach. The full potential of the movement will only be realized by those educators

who can combine creativity in using limited funds and creativity in developing meaningful exercises

and discussions, at least until a centralized database or agency exists that can provide instruction to all

teachers. There are a growing number of resources available on the Internet, including a website

posted by the Los Angeles-based Center for Media Literacy[1], and a list of very helpful links provided

by Ritsumei Kan University in Japan,[2] which includes links to Adbusters and the Media Literacy

Online Project.

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[1] http://www.medialit.org
[2] http://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/kic/so/semminor/ML/linkor-e.html

As for the future of media literacy, it seems safe to say that as methods are tried and found to be less effective, they will fade from use and the approaches within the movement may become slightly more congruent with each other. Also, as conceptions of the audience[s] continue to change, it is expected that media literacy initiatives will draw from emerging theories of media effects, as it has done successfully thus far. The single largest need is for more evaluative research that can document what works and what does not, in order to provide empirical rigor and prevent efforts that will prove futile because of a lack of conceptual clarity and/or effective planning. As these results accumulate, the movement will necessarily scale away its less fruitful efforts and focus on those that have the most promise.

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