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Voices in the Field  
***The Basic Course in Communication, Media Literacy,  
and the College Curriculum***

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**ABSTRACT**

Various authors make suggestions about the inclusion of public address, civility critical communication pedagogy and social justice into the basic course in communication studies. Media literacy pedagogy encourages students to actively and critically consider the messages they send and receive, critically assess all forms of communication, be encouraged to engage more actively with governmental affairs, understand the role of media and other messages in the construction of their own identities, and more effectively understand the role of values, standpoints, beliefs, etc. on their communication choices, as well as on those of others. However, the National Communication Association does not list media literacy as a core competency for the basic course in spite of public calls to include media literacy in K-12 education. This essay argues that the communication studies discipline should make message/media literacy a standard objective of all versions of the college-level basic course. Doing so would help clarify and highlight the importance of the communication studies discipline, as well as encourage a more well-defined perception of communication studies.

**KEYWORDS:** *communication studies, public speaking, interpersonal communication, small group communication, basic course, media literacy, message evaluation*

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It never fails that when I start to talk about the media and its influence in any number of my courses, many students simply don't believe that the media has a profound impact on their lives or identities. My response to their skepticism is to ask them to raise their hands if they have no designer clothes, shoes, or accessories on them. As you can imagine, few students are able to raise their hands, if any. Thus begins our conversation about the impact of the media on their lives. In other courses, we may be discussing argumentation or policy speeches and it becomes clear that students very rarely, if ever, critically assess the leaders,

pundits, and other sources of information they cite in their discussions of public policy. It takes no more than a question or two to uncover the unstated assumptions and logical fallacies that they've procured from popular public debates of today's issues to use in their own arguments.

These conversations tend to happen in my college-level basic communication course, and—to the credit of many colleges and universities—millions of college students are required to take a course in communication studies to graduate; this course is typically referred to in the discipline as the “basic course.” Given how many sources recognize the primary importance of communication skills for college graduates, this requirement makes sense (“Skills”, Adams, 2014; Byrne, J.A., 2014; Colvin, 2015; Dishman, 2016; Dorfman, 2014; Eckart, 2014; Goo, 2015; Griffit, 2015; Korn, 2014; Maxwell, 2015; Satell, 2015; Symonds, 2015; Walker, 2015; Wildavski, 2016; Williams, 2016).

But in spite of the constant call by employers for increased communication training in college, less than half of all undergraduate institutions require oral communication training for all students (Bok, 2006). Although this statistic is less than I'd like to see, with over 20 million students enrolled in colleges and universities in 2016, there is still a significant opportunity for communication programs to play an important role in message/media literacy (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Often the basic course in communication is a course in public speaking (57.8%), while less frequently it focuses on interpersonal communication (1.9%), or small group communication (0.3%). A substantial proportion of courses are hybrid courses (35.3%), defined by Morreale, Hugenberg, and Worley (2006) as one that covers interpersonal, group communication, and public speaking all in one class.

The communication discipline has not chosen to officially mark one option as the preferred choice; each of these courses give students important theoretical grounding, and offer practical applications of theory so that students can learn to communicate better in the important areas of their lives—public *and* private. Still, that decision has consequences for our identity as a discipline, in and out of the academy. Without one specific basic course that is identified nationally (such as English with the basic course in composition), we struggle to be recognized and discussed in any cohesive way as a discipline.

The discipline has articulated core competencies for all basic courses. The 2014 Core Competencies for Introductory Communication Courses report from the National Communication Association (NCA) includes the following core competencies for the basic course in communication: monitoring and presenting yourself; practicing communication ethics; adapting to others; practicing effective listening; expressing messages; identifying and explaining fundamental communication processes; and creating and analyzing message strategies (National Communication Association, 2014). Though the final competency is worded in a way that suggests media literacy could be included, a closer look at all of these core competencies reveals no discussion of media literacy. Rather, mention of “media” only relates to social media and the media as a possible medium for human communication. Thus, there seems to be no public

organization-wide support for media literacy inclusion into the basic communication course at the post-secondary level at this time. This omission is surprising given that NCA formally recognized the importance connections between media literacy and excellence in communication when it included media literacy in its standards and competency statement for K-12 education almost 20 years ago.

A recent history of the National Communication Association's stance towards media literacy reveals differing levels of interest over time. As Ward-Barnes (2010) notes, NCA argued in 1998 that media literate communicators demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the following: the ways people use media in their personal and public lives; the complex relationships among audiences and media content; the fact that media content is produced within social and cultural contexts; the commercial nature of media; and the ability to use media to communicate to specific audiences (National Communication Association, 1998). In 2012, NCA published a revised version of their 2010 public policy statement on inclusion of speaking, listening, and media literacy into the common curriculum, which again argued for the presence of media literacy education in K-12 environments (National Communication Association, 2012).

Given this strong stance towards media literacy in K-12 education, it is remarkable to note that there seems to be no statement by NCA regarding the importance of media literacy as central to communication training in post-secondary education. In addition to the suggestions of NCA, various authors in Volume 26 of *Basic Communication Course Annual (BCCA)* make suggestions about what objectives should be a part of all basic courses, including public address (Upchurch, 2014), civility (Troester, 2014), critical communication pedagogy (Kahl, 2014), and social justice (Patterson and Swartz, 2014). These suggestions, which are all worthwhile, did not include a clear argument in favor of media literacy, either. Thus, in the essay I argue that the communication discipline should make message/media literacy a primary objective of the basic course in communication.

### **How Communication Studies Can Bring Media Literacy to the College Curriculum**

In the United States, media literacy in our country has generally been geared toward K-12 education. Although there is no national standard for media literacy (Christ and Potter, 1998), most states have some language regarding media literacy in their state K-12 curricula (Hobbs, 2005).<sup>1</sup> In my view, a separate message/media literacy requirement should be made across all general education curricula; just as written and oral communication skills are typically required. Even on my most hopeful of days, however, I can't imagine such an addition happening anytime soon. Thus, to me, it is incumbent upon Communication Studies instructors to ensure that students leave college with this increasingly important theoretical knowledge and skillset that can be applied to direct *and*

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<sup>1</sup> Media literacy education is an international curricular concern, but this essay will focus only on the college experience in the United States.

mediated human communication, because we have one of the few courses that millions of college students are required to take in order to graduate.

Although 'media literacy' is the common nomenclature and has several sub-categories including areas such as visual literacy (Moore and Dwyer, 1994), television literacy (Buckingham, 1993), digital literacy (Gilster, 1997; Buckingham, 2006; Hobbs, 2011), cine-literacy (British Film Institute, 2000), and information literacy (Bruce, 1997), I propose a shift to "message/media literacy," at least for use in Communication Studies, to account for the fact that messages from the media are often communicated to citizens secondhand, through friends, families, and leaders of the primary institutions that shape our lives, such as education and religion. In addition, because leaders, marketers, and other purveyors of messages warranting critical assessment can now communicate directly to citizens via social media, we are often dealing with messages that are not communicated via traditional media sources. Rather, they are communicated directly to constituents via a Facebook post, for example. Thus, the phrase message/media literacy makes sense to me when talking about media literacy as it would enable it to align with the objectives of basic communication course.

Media literacy is fundamentally a communication practice. According to the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE, 2007), media literacy education (MLE) first requires, "active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create" (3). Second, MLE "expands the concept of literacy to include all forms of media" (3). Next, it "builds and reinforces skills for learners of all ages" (4). Fourth, MLE "develops informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society" (4). In addition, MLE "recognizes that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization" (5). And finally, MLE "affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages," and thus teaches students about how they make meaning in relation to their own values and beliefs, and how to make informed choices about their interactions with media (5). Central to these MLE objectives are not only what media we consume (be it a television program or a political speech), but also how this media consumption influences our communication.

Indeed, media consumption influences our communication with others interpersonally and within specific groups, and impacts *intrapersonal* conversations within ourselves about who we are and who we want to be. Each of these MLE objectives links clearly to what we teach in our various basic courses in communication; the inclusion of message/media evaluation in our basic courses would be a relatively simple shift for faculty.

When comparing the suggestions of Basic Communication Course Annual, the NCA core competency suggestions, and the NAMLE core principles, it's easy to see the significant overlap. A call for public address in the basic course aligns with the call to analyze message strategies. Recognizing that media functions as an agent of socialization is an integral part of understanding issues of social justice in class. The call to understand the presentation of self is in line with the call to realize that we construct our own meanings of media from our personal skills, beliefs, and experiences. The appeal for instruction in civility goes hand-in-

hand with a focus on communication ethics. And critical communication pedagogy is intimately linked to the development of informed, reflective, and engaged participants in a democracy. These links, as well as others, further support the notion that message/media literacy would make an excellent primary objective for the basic course in communication studies, regardless of whether the basic course is grounded in public speaking, interpersonal communication, or small group communication.<sup>2</sup>

### **Public Speaking**

The public speaking course has always dealt with the evaluation of messages with a focus on students' construction and presentation of their own speeches. Students often also evaluate political speeches or other public messages when first learning to apply the theories and skills they will use to construct and perform their own argumentation-focused speeches for the course. Thus, in teaching argumentation, message/media literacy can be included by using advertising campaigns or political communication to discuss logical fallacies and emotional appeals.

For example, I use alcohol and perfume advertisements to talk about appeals to companionship, and then offer some perspective by incongruity by showing the *Saturday Night Live* parody, "Schmitt's Gay" (Michaels, 1991). It begins as a normal alcohol advertisement, complete with raging rock music and two young, white males, promising companionship and fun with the addition of alcohol, but that familiar, sexist narrative turns into a pool party for gay men to point to the unstated heteronormative, gendered, racist, and sexist assumptions in that very common genre of advertisements. Discussions about audience analysis can also be garnered using advertisements and asking students to talk about why certain advertisements are geared towards specific audiences, how those messages are constructed, and what strategies are used to construct that message with a particular audience in mind.

The foundations of this course—critical thinking and assessment, audience analysis, persuasive strategies, argumentation, delivery, and language use—are all topics ripe with possibilities for media literacy education. In fact, a student's final speech could even be a critical analysis of a particular political speech, film, television program, or advertising campaign. In addition to satisfying the core competencies suggested by NCA, this assignment would marry many goals from the NAMLE and the BCCA, such as a focus on public address, strategies of critical communication pedagogy, critical thinking regarding messages, and the development of an informed and engaged participant in democracy.

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<sup>2</sup> By definition, a hybrid basic course in communication could mix and mingle any and all of these ideas, thus I'm not addressing this course specifically in this essay. In addition, these general teaching strategies are not presented as new teaching methods, but rather as examples of media literacy education messages as crafted for my basic course in communication.

### **Interpersonal Communication**

Courses in interpersonal communication typically focus on topics such as the role of communication in personal identity and perception, verbal and nonverbal communication, listening, emotions, and communicating interpersonally in a variety of contexts. In cases where interpersonal communication serves as a basic course, message/media literacy can be used to teach how our identities (and thus also our relationships to others), our perceptions, and our communication/conflict styles are impacted by the messages we receive. From our first days surrounded by mostly pink and blue to the YouTube video we last watched, the circle of interpersonal/intrapersonal communication is happening. The messages we consume first work to constitute part of ourselves in specific ways, and then, to lesser or greater extents (depending on the message), we construct meaning from those messages and apply them to ourselves; when we finally interact with the world and its citizens, we use messages based, in part, on that message we first received—the YouTube video we watched.

Hence, students in interpersonal classes can learn what messages impact them and how that impact might be accomplished, as well as how those messages and their impacts on our beliefs then impact our communication with others in all contexts, including work, friendships, romance, communities, and families. In my course, students watch the documentary *Skinheads: Soldiers of the Race War* (Cookson, 1993), a documentary that does an excellent job of pointing to the conditions under which citizens develop racist attitudes and/or an affinity for those that lead racist groups. To include MLE in this assignment, students examine the link between the interpersonal communication shown in the documentary to the rhetoric prominent within these movements, as well as the role of “dogwhistle racism” in mainstream political communication that encourages similar beliefs without overtly racist rhetoric. Students evaluate not only what interpersonal communication means to the individuals and their identities, but also what parts of those messages resonate in more mainstream rhetoric. Aside from political or social rhetoric, students find that even advertising privileges white beauty norms, helping them to decompartmentalize racist rhetoric as that which only happens “over there” and certainly not within their own interpersonal/mediated worlds. The assignment combines the core competencies determined by NCA and the priorities described by NAMLE and *BCCA*, including issues of civility and social justice; the understanding that people construct their own meanings of media messages using their individual skills beliefs, and experiences; the recognition that media is an agent of socialization; and the call for active inquiry and critical thinking regarding media messages.

### **Small Group Communication**

Small group communication students, like interpersonal students, learn about how messages impact how they see themselves and their communication with others, and how their assumptions about others and themselves can help or hinder group interaction and productivity. Topics often include group problem solving, managing group diversity and relationships, leading groups, roles in

small groups, and dealing with conflict in small groups. Also similar to interpersonal communication, the course typically encourages students to consider how their views of themselves and others (as well as how those views came to be) are integral to their effectiveness in groups. One place to add MLE to this course is in the discussion of diversity and managing relationships, especially as a leader. In this course I ask students to engage in some problem solving as a group, but rather than simply ask students to solve the problem as a group, each student wears a hat with instructions such as “argue with me,” “make me your leader,” or “ignore me.” They must treat their fellow group members as the hat requires. Students do not know what their hat says and those instructions, of course, make it much more difficult to get the problem solved. Once the groups have completed their assignment, I ask students to take off the hats and look at what directions their group members were given for interacting with them.

This is an excellent time to talk about why we may have a tendency to ignore, argue with, agree with, or encourage leadership with certain people and not others. We dig into what messages encourage our attitudes towards others and how these tendencies can impact our work in small groups. Why do we tend to encourage leadership in men and not women? Why might we assume someone with a lower level of education shouldn't be someone whose ideas are worth considering? Are their racial stereotypes we have learned that encourage or discourage different types of behaviors? Students can think about these questions in relation to messages they have received in the public sphere about different groups of people, and the tendency towards stereotypes so typical in media and other forms of oral communication. In addition, throughout the small group course, students can consider how their actions as an individual and as a member of a small group are influenced by mediated representations of individuals (sexist or racist media portrayals, for example) or by mediated notions of group decision-making (reality television “votes” and “decisions”, for instance), most of which are designed to encourage conflict for the audience's entertainment. What are students learning about themselves and how they should work with others from the messages they receive on television or from our own dysfunctional U.S. Congress and its rhetoric, which is often vicious and designed to maintain conflict? As in the other two examples, this assignment merges the NCA core competencies with those objectives/principles communicated by NAMLE and *BCCA*. For example, the *BCCA* goals of civility, critical communication pedagogy, and social justice combine with NAMLE principles such as active inquiry/critical thinking, the recognition that media literacy includes all forms of media, and the development of an informed, reflective, and engaged participant in democracy—even if the democracy we're talking about is a professional or community group instead of a country.

These are, of course, only a few suggestions about how we can add message/media literacy to our basic courses, but the addition of these and other assignments in message/media literacy can bring about the important inclusion of the objectives noted by the authors of the *Basic Communication Course Annual* forum (public address, civility, critical communication pedagogy, and social

justice), as well as encouraging the goals of the National Association for Media Literacy Education, and the National Communication Association noted above.

### **Conclusion**

I started thinking about this essay in response to the objectives for the basic course encouraged by the various authors of the *BCCA*--public address studies, civility, critical communication pedagogy, and social justice. We clearly can see how the inclusion of message/media evaluation can encourage public address studies in our basic courses: students engaged in examples of political and other public communication can simultaneously learn about public address, some of its history, and many of its strategies when they evaluate public messages from a variety of orators including politicians, social activists, and even members of their own college, local, regional, and state communities.

Second, as students learn more about how their own standpoints and how the standpoints of the media/public messages impact their own sense of self and their assumptions about others, it is possible that we will see positive changes in civility as a student's message/media literacy skills start to help deconstruct the walls they've built around themselves, as well as deconstruct the boxes they've built for others in their minds using messages garnered from the media. When students understand not only what makes them different but also what makes them the same as the "others" they're not so sure about, it's possible that their greater understanding of how they got to their standpoint and how others got to theirs will help them build, rather than burn, bridges.

Third, message/media evaluation is nothing if not centered in critical communication pedagogy that Kahl notes centers on "challenging students to examine hegemony and marginalization that occur in their communities" as a result of mediated/public communication (2014, p. 36). As students begin to understand the role of communication in the construction of their own identities and their definitions of others, they are more likely to also recognize (and hopefully engage) in helping to break down hegemony and marginalization when they see it.

Finally, message/media literacy training can help students become more aware of the ways that public messages can frame information to the advantage of one group and the detriment of another and help them figure out how their perceptions of "others" has been shaped by the media/public messages and how those perceptions have impacted their (in)action with regard to issues of political, economic, and social justice. Such knowledge might encourage students to define social justice as an important value to them after taking our basic course. Thus, each of the preferable objectives noted by these authors can be reached with the single objective of message/media literacy.

Moving from the suggested course objectives from *Basic Communication Course Annual* to the requirements of media literacy education suggested by the National Association for Media Literacy Education (2007), it is clear that the communication basic course, with a consistent objective of message/media literacy, can meet these important goals. Most obviously, such a course would encourage students to actively and critically assess the messages they receive and



create. Indeed, that goal is already part and parcel of all basic courses in communication. A move to a common objective of message/media literacy only makes that fact clearer and more consistently worded. Second, as courses as diverse as public speaking, interpersonal communication, small group communication, and the hybrid basic course each adopt the common objective of message/media literacy, it is only natural that the second goal of MLE, the expansion of media literacy education to include all forms of media, is met.

Whether discussing the latest stump speech by a political candidate, the impact of social media on our sense of self, or the representation of small group problem solving in the film *Twelve Angry Men*, the principles of message/media literacy can be taught and applied to all forms of media our students interact with on a daily basis. Next, MLE requires the development and strengthening of literacy skills in people of all ages. While this may not seem as important a goal for an essay focused on college classrooms, we should remember that many of our classrooms often are not filled with only traditionally-aged students. Whether working with the 79-year-old coming back to finish the degree he had to stop as a teen, the veteran using her benefits to earn her degree in her thirties, or the student right out of high school, the skills and strategies learned will be useful. Moreover, my experience in teaching media literacy is that students tend to share what they've learned in class with family and friends, therefore spreading the impact of media literacy education beyond the classroom and their own thinking.

The fourth goal of MLE, to develop “informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society” (National Association for Media Literacy Education 2007, p. 4) is often already met in our basic courses and even our departmental majors. One of the objectives of the major in Communication Arts and Sciences at my college is an “ability to function as a member of a democratic community.” In fact, as part of the trivium in Ancient Greece or as part of land grant universities across the nation since their founding, the goals of an education in rhetoric/communication studies have generally been grounded in recognizing the need for a public educated the field of rhetoric. Our discipline has expanded to recognize the rhetorical function of communication in a variety of contexts from intrapersonal to organizational or even national political communication, but that foundational value of the importance of citizens in a democracy being educated in the power of communication is maintained throughout the communication studies discipline. Learning to critically assess all forms of public communication can also encourage students to engage in politics in their own communities (Masterman, 1985; National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2007; Kahne, Lee, and Feezell, 2012; Mihailidis and Thevenin, 2013). The addition to the common objective of message/media evaluation only further clarifies and amplifies this increasingly important goal of MLE.

The requirement that an education in media literacy “recognizes that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization” (National Association for Media Literacy Education, 2007, 5) also aligns with our basic courses, which recognize the impact of media/public messages on all processes of socialization. From our own socialization in interpersonal communication, to the

socialization of a new employee into an organization, to the socialization of citizens into an “American” identification via constitutive rhetoric in political communication or the newest blockbuster war film, our basic courses regularly already recognize the important role that mediated messages play in our socialization. Hence again, the addition of this common objective will serve to illuminate and intensify a relatively consistent objective already part and parcel to the basic course in communication. Finally, instruction in how to deconstruct media/public messages serves to help students understand how to better construct their own messages, and, in addition, can teach them something about how to consider the important relationships between their own skills, beliefs, experiences, values, and standpoints when constructing their own messages or making meaning out of a message constructed by someone else. Such skills sets meet the final requirement of MLE, which is the affirmation that “people use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages” (National Association for Media Literacy Education 2007, 5).

Communication studies is perhaps the discipline best poised to teach the important theories and skills linked to message/media literacy because of our focus on communication from the most intimate utterances between two people, to the assessment of speeches delivered to millions people at a time; and because millions of students are required to take the basic course in communication every year. In addition, all of our discipline’s fields, to some extent, already pay some attention to how media influences our communication and impacts our own interpersonal and public communication. Formally including some elements of message/media literacy in all of our basic courses could give our discipline the central identity we always seem to be searching for as we try to explain the value of “what we do” to students, parents, and administrators who often unfortunately view communication as simply “something we all do,” rather than something we all need to do *much better*. In other words, a consistent focus on message/media evaluation would not only help our students learn to navigate the role of communication in their lives in a number of contexts, but it could also help raise awareness and appreciation for what it is that we so passionately study and teach. Just as many faculty find it easier to explain complex theories, philosophies, or skills to students using examples from media, so too can faculty and students more easily explain how the basic course in communication teaches its core competencies when they are able to talk about those concepts using examples from various forms of messages/media.

The ability for students to go further than simply saying, “We give speeches” when talking about a public speaking course, for example, can help clarify, build, and strengthen stakeholder perceptions of the basic course and of the communication studies discipline as a whole. Furthermore, in this age of increased required assessment, media literacy objectives may be a means by which departments can more easily assess their basic course program (Mihailidis, 2008). But most importantly, by urging the communication studies discipline to adopt the central goal of message/media literacy in our basic courses, we make an increasingly important and valuable impact on our students and on the ways they interact with the world and consider the kind of world they want to live in and

build during and long after college. As Mihailidis notes, “As students prepare to become independent and active participants in civil society, they must learn to actively seek, use, and assess information pertinent to their lives, communities, and country” (2008, 3). Thus, the common objective of message/media evaluation would be a true gift of lifelong learning to the vast majority of U.S. college students who must enroll in our basic course. It is a gift capable of being paid forward for generations to come.

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