

Understanding the Power of Media and the Importance of Media Literacy in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Media Literacy is both a complex and widely misunderstood discipline. Indeed, media education is often dismissed by some educators as unnecessary; they believe in this age of diffuse and affordable digital technology and social networking services that young people will naturally acquire the skills necessary to safely navigate the modern media landscape simply by being participants in it. I believe this is a simplistic perspective, particularly in today's digital age. The reality is that young people must become aware of the awesome power of the media and learn to understand what constitutes media, and any study of media literacy "*...must also entail an in-depth critical understanding of how these media work, how they communicate, how they represent the world, and how they are produced and used.*" (Buckingham, 2019.) In order for young people to become bona fide media literate members of society, an introduction to the essential elements of media and media literacy is urgently required.

Introduction

"Everything we know that we didn't discover from direct contact with our environment, family and friends, we learned from media."

Pike (2014)

This paper does not propose a pedagogical approach to actually teaching the mechanics of media literacy (for example how to analyse and interpret news media texts, songs, films etc.). The purpose here is to create a program that can help students become aware of what media itself *is* and what media literacy study entails and why it is important in our lives, particularly in today's digital media driven society. As the title of this paper indicates, this course will be geared more towards an understanding of the might and influence of media and the importance of media literacy.

Through my research, I discovered that the field of media literacy is a hugely complex domain. We are, in today's digitised world, surrounded and influenced by media more than ever before and they have an incalculable impact on our everyday lives, shaping our worldview, affecting our personal and professional relationships and altering our social and even neurological behaviours.

How can we make any sense of it all? I came to the conclusion that in order to get to grips with media literacy it is first necessary to comprehend the nature of media itself.

The first question I believe we should attempt to answer is: **What constitutes media?** Defining the term *media* is a virtually impossible task. However, in *attempting* to do this I believe we can begin to understand the power of the media and its impact on all of us particularly in today's digital media world.

The second question that I believe needs to be answered on the road towards understanding and appreciating media literacy is: **Why is it especially important to be media literate in today's digital media age?** As Smith (2015, p. 3) puts it, "*We are reared and educated in a mediated world.*" Consequently, media literacy needs to be treated as more than just

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a topic of interest. Arguably, it is essential to our way of living and in helping us to make critical decisions throughout our lives. By tackling this question, I believe we can come to appreciate the undeniable importance of being a media literate member of a democratic society.

For those of us as educators with a view to implementing a media literacy course at university or at any institution for that matter, a third and necessary question is: **How should we approach the teaching and learning of media literacy?** There are numerous pedagogical approaches to this end, but a fundamental issue here is the dilemma that arises in the debate on protectionism versus empowerment. What is our role as educators in this field and how much, if any, influence should we exert on our students? In dealing with this question, I believe we can become enlightened in deciding our approach.

For reasons of clarity, I have decided to divide this paper into three parts based on the fundamental questions I posed above. Each part will begin with one of the key questions and this will be followed by a relevant quotation from important literature on the subject of media literacy.

Part 1. What constitutes *media*?

mass media 1. (the media) The various technological means of producing and disseminating messages and cultural forms (notably news, information, entertainment, and advertising) to large, widely dispersed, heterogeneous audiences. In the world today these include television, radio, the cinema, newspapers, magazines, best-selling books, audio CDs, DVDs and the Internet.

Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication (2011, p. 257)

Defining the Undefinable

Many different definitions of the term *media* exist and perhaps one of the most provocative is that *media is everything*.

Buckingham (2019, pp. 1, 8) claims that “...*we live in a world of almost complete mediation*” and, “*Media are everywhere. They are like the air we breathe...*”

The anthropologist, Ruth Finnegan, on the topic of human communication and mediation points out that mediational performances often take place “...*through the use of material objects and (not only) technologies, from clothes to seals, tactile maps to scented letters.*” She adds that, “*Even the land around us can be a medium in communicating.*” (In Durant and Lambrou, 2013, p. 189). This raises an important point that challenges Marshall McLuhan’s contention that “*The medium is the message*”. Finnegan warns us that whatever the medium through which a message is disseminated might be, we should keep in mind that “...*no medium, from stone pebble to written page, ultimately communicates in its own right, but only as it is used and interpreted by human enactors.*” (Ibid.)

While a definitive description of what media constitutes can never be satisfactorily agreed upon, in order to establish a rationale for a media literacy course, it is desirable to attain at least a ‘working definition’ of the term and then to select the media channels and platforms most relevant to the instructors and learners for use throughout the course.

Let us begin by dissecting the definition from the Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication (ODMC) quoted above and analysing its key elements.

Firstly, the ODMC states that media are “*the various technological means of producing and disseminating messages and cultural forms*”.

The term *technological means* needs to be addressed for two reasons. Firstly, it risks becoming an anachronism. Since technology continues its rapid and relentless development, so the technological means of yesteryear will be incongruent to today’s world and the technology of the future even more so.

The second issue is that messages can also be produced through channels that do not require the direct use of technology. Some examples of such are art (painting and sculpture etc.), the spoken word (poetry, *rakugo* etc.) and theatrical performances such as plays, musicals, concerts and opera. As for disseminating these messages, rock bands, dance troupes and theatrical

groups travel the world spreading their messages as indeed do works of art.

But the key point here is the idea that *messages are disseminated*. Every form of media sends a message of some kind and in order for that message to be considered media, it must be shared with the outside world and allowed to be analysed and evaluated. This is the case for any media message, whether it be an overt political message in a television documentary, or a simple catchphrase or illustration on an advertising hoarding (for example the now universally-recognised and hugely powerful Nike swoosh).

The second part of the definition refers to *large, widely dispersed, heterogeneous audiences*.

While this may have been an accurate description of mass media in the past, a contemporary media message does not need to reach a large number of people for it to be considered part of the current media landscape. With today's social media platforms, anything we post online, whether it be a photo on Instagram or a 'like' on Facebook or a tweet of any kind on Twitter, even though the message may only be intended for consumption by a limited number of recipients, it remains 'out there' and has the potential to reach a large number of people, in the way an innocuous upload to You Tube may suddenly 'go viral'.

The final part of the ODCM definition lists 'today's' means of disseminating messages and cultural forms, specifically *television, radio, the cinema, newspapers, magazines, best-selling books, audio CDs, DVDs and the Internet*.

While this list is quite comprehensive, we can add to it so-called 'out-of-home media' used primarily in advertising. The EMC is a major out-of-home marketing agency based in Pennsylvania, U.S. that lists on its website various channels of advertising, including billboards, posters, buses, street kiosks, taxis, aerial banners, blimps and pizza boxes along with many others.

Other media formats not on the ODCM list are 'retro' media formats, such as LP or vinyl records, and cassettes. There is a resurgence in the sale of this type of media, particularly in the case of vinyl records. According to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), vinyl sales are increasing three times as fast as CD sales are declining and it is only a matter of time before vinyl sales overtake CD sales for the first time since the 1980s.

Nick Pernisco, author of *Practical Media Literacy* and creator of the website *Understanding Media* at <https://understandmedia.com/> offers a simpler definition, elements of which we can incorporate into the existing definition from the ODMC.

Pernisco describes mass media as,

"...a group that constructs messages with embedded values, and that disseminates those messages to a specific portion of the public in order to achieve a specific goal."

As we can see, the added elements not present in the ODMC definition are '*...with embedded values*' and '*...to a specific portion of the public in order to achieve a specific goal.*' While these points may seem fairly obvious, they are important and can be easily overlooked by those inexperienced in the field of media literacy.

Pernisco goes on to say, "*...it's impossible to find any message in the media (or even with people we know personally) that doesn't have a subjective bias.*" This suggests that we need to be constantly aware that each message has "*embedded values*" and this gives us more reason to carefully analyse and critically evaluate the message before we accept and respond to it.

As for "*...to a specific portion of the public*", clearly Pernisco believes it is necessary to be aware that many media messages are disseminated with a particular target audience in mind, though this is certainly not always the case. It can be said that respectable international news agencies report news stories and disseminate information globally in order to inform 'the general public' without targeting any specific demographic.

The final point draws our attention to what Pernisco refers to as the ulterior motive of the message. It is fair to say that every media message has a purpose either implicit or otherwise. Pernisco claims that all media messages are devised in order to 'sell' something, whether that be "*...a product, or service, or an ideology*" and we need to be conscious of this, too.

Let us then combine both definitions dealt with above to create our new working definition in the following way:

Mass media or media refers to:

The various available technological and non-technological means of constructing and disseminating messages and cultural forms, often with embedded values (notably news, information, entertainment, and advertising) to either a specific portion of the public or widely dispersed, heterogeneous audiences, in order to achieve specific goals.

Channels and platforms

The distinction between media *channels* and *platforms* is not always clear. In simple terms a *platform* is what we use to build the message on, and a *channel* is the means by which we disseminate the message.

This distinction becomes blurred when we take into account platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. In both cases, these are indeed platforms in that the user builds a profile — a library of images and posts — which is then stored on the platform’s server. However, both Facebook and Instagram also act as the channels through which the images and messages are conveyed and disseminated into the public domain. The same can be said of other powerful and hugely influential platform-come-channel or channel-come-platform entities, such as Google and Amazon.

The diagram below is my attempt to illustrate how media channels and platforms, particularly those relevant to young people today, are interrelated.

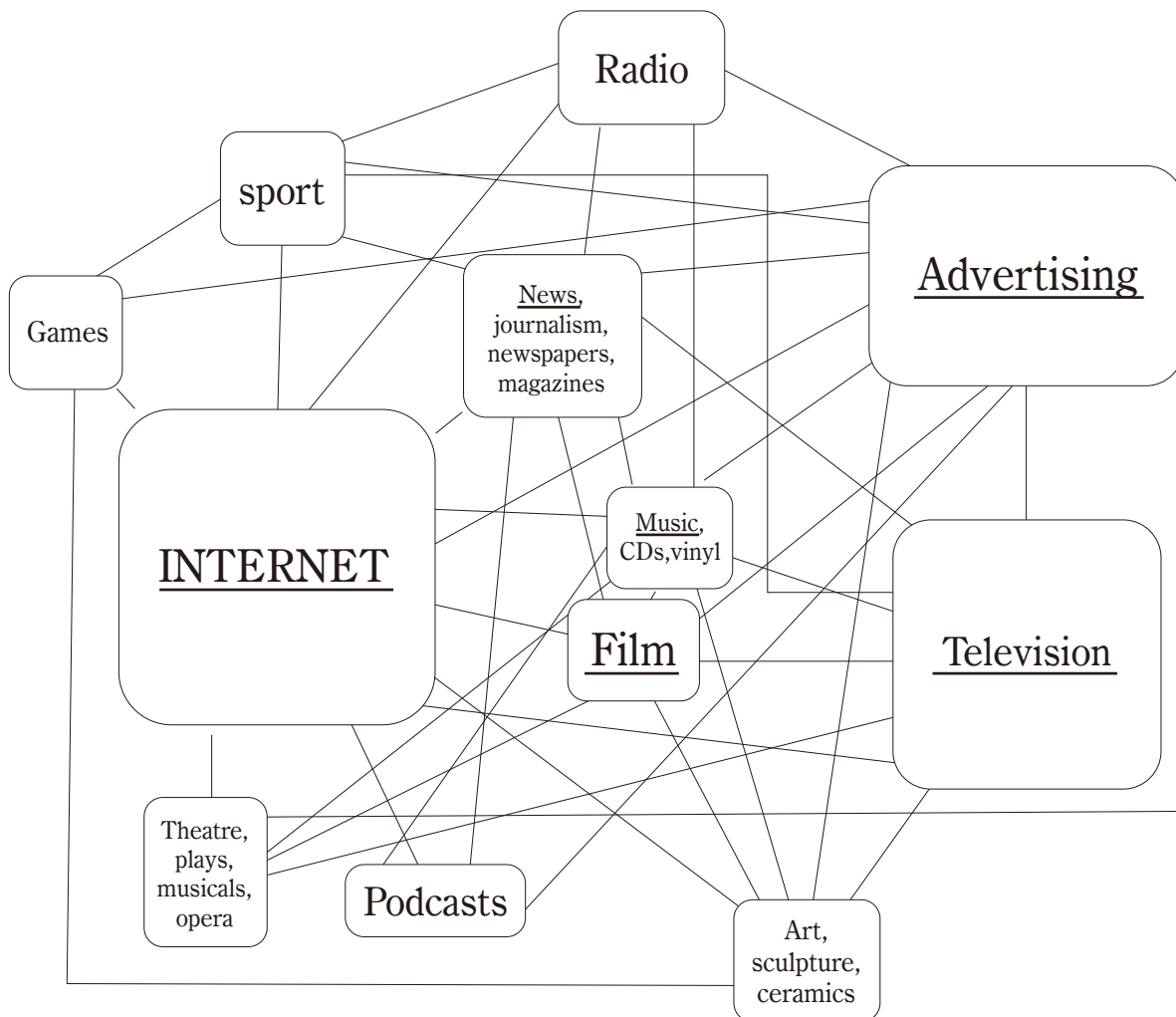


Diagram 1: The interconnected nature of popular media in today’s media world. Since I have combined both media channels and media platforms, I will not make a distinction and from hereon in refer to all the items in the diagram as media or media types. Underlined are the elements that have the greatest connectivity.

Media type	No. of Links
Advertising	11
Internet	11
Music etc.	9
News etc.	8
Television	8
Film	7
Art etc.	6
Sport	6
Radio	5
Theatre etc	5
Games	4
Podcasts	4

Table 1: Number of interconnections (links) for each media type in Diagram 1

Each boxed item refers to a particular medium and I make no distinction between channels and platforms here. The internet, for example includes all types of channels and platforms such as web browsers, email, social networking services etc.

The media types selected are those I consider most relevant to students aged between 18 and 23. The criteria by which they were generated and how the interconnectivity between any two items was decided, were based on extensive research and on my personal fifteen-year experience of teaching a media literacy-based seminar at my university.

The diagram clearly indicates that the *internet* and *advertising*, each with 11 links to other media types are dominant. In the case of the internet, this is not surprising since it is the ultimate ‘hybrid’ medium in that virtually all media is now accessible online.

However, it is worthwhile pointing out that *advertising*, also with 11 links, plays a major role in media. Let us not forget our working definition of media that tells us each media message has embedded values and is often geared towards a specific target audience for a specific purpose and that purpose is usually to ‘sell’.

Radio and *vinyl*, traditionally considered ‘old media’ have, in recent years, undergone something of a renaissance and this is evident in the diagram. *Radio* in particular needs redefining since it has profited from its connection with the internet and the number of ‘internet radio stations’ has increased exponentially in recent years.

We can also see that *music* has an important position on the media landscape. It is an essential element in most media and in particular in film, television, advertising and on the internet through music streaming platforms such as iTunes and Spotify.

Film is also enjoying a new lease of life, again thanks to the internet and online movie streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime and HBO.

News media continues to have a huge influence, more so today disseminating news stories and information through new media, primarily the internet in the form of online news websites and downloadable podcasts.

The diagram is by no means exhaustive and is only intended as an indicator of media connectivity, but it is useful in selecting which media types an educator might prioritize for greater analysis in a media literacy classroom.

Part 2. Why is it especially important to be media literate in today’s digital media age?

“The media are undoubtedly the major contemporary means of cultural expression and communication: to become an active participant in public life necessarily involves making use of the modern media.” (Buckingham, 2003, p. 5)

We are living in an age of information overload where ideas and philosophies of all kinds are diffuse, and yet, paradoxically, some might say we are living in a world of ignorance. It seems with today's technological innovations affordable and readily available to many, we have at our fingertips vast amounts of 'knowledge' instantly accessible. Each of us can become an 'expert' on anything—at least for a fleeting moment. However, what is at risk here is the increasingly endangered art of *critical thinking*—one of the core principles of media literacy that promotes the intellectual analysis, independent interpretation and evaluation of media messages and the ability to respond to these messages in an objective and informed manner.

University of London Professor of Education, David Buckingham, contends that the greatest influence on today's society is not the family, the church or the school, but the media. Therefore, it is essential that the school curriculum is seen to be “...*relevant to children's lives outside school and to the wider society.*” (Ibid.). Buckingham goes on to add that the media does not represent the facts per se, but, instead, they offer *channels* through which information is sent in the shape of “...*images and representations (both factual and fictional) that inevitably shape our view of reality.*” (Ibid.)

Marshall McLuhan claimed, “...*societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media than by the content of the communication.*” (McLuhan, 1967). The Praeger Handbook of Media Literacy, Vol. 1 (Silverblatt, 2014, preface p. xv) echoes McLuhan's words spoken over four decades earlier:

“One of the criteria of becoming an educated person is developing the critical faculties to understand one's environment—an environment that, increasingly, is being shaped by the media.”

Digital Media Dependence

The sight that greets most university teachers on entering the morning classroom is arguably a common one, at least in those classrooms in countries that might be described as being on the 'right' side of the digital divide. It is the sight of students' eyes glued to the small screens (though constantly growing with each new generation upgrade) of the now ubiquitous smartphone. A similar sight can be observed on the crowded yet silent commuter trains in major cities. In this case the smartphones and tablets are being utilized by people of all ages.

In today's society, as we become increasingly addicted to technology, the dangers are not lost on critics of the digital onslaught on our neurological capacities. In his Pulitzer Prize nominated work, *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr makes the bold assertion that internet use is actually changing the way our brains work. He suggests that while technology presents us with the opportunity to learn a new set of skills, there seems to be a trade-off. We seem to be losing capacities that have served us for millennia.

Carr argues,

As the time we spend scanning web pages crowds out the time we spend reading books, as the time we spend exchanging bite-sized text messages crowds out the time we spend composing sentences and paragraphs, as the time we spend hopping across links crowds out the time we devote to reflection and contemplation, the circuits that support these old intellectual functions and pursuits weaken and begin to break apart. The brain recycles the disused neurons and synapses for other, more pressing work. (Carr, 2010, p. 120)

According to Carr, another dramatic change in behaviour involves our reading habits. He goes on to lament the transformation from actual *reading* to what he describes as “*power browsing*”. Research at San Jose State University in 2003 showed that 'well-educated' people were switching their reading habits in this way. Of the 113 people surveyed (these people included teachers, scientists and accountants among other professionals, between thirty and forty-five years old over a period of ten years), 82% said they became more engaged in non-linear reading such as skimming and scanning, while only 27% engaged regularly in more “in-depth” reading.

Critics of digital media, and in particular of dominant digital media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat, often claim that instead of reading books (the implication being that in doing so we can learn more things more effectively) many of us are simply wasting our time constantly hopping from one platform to the next without actually learning anything.

Caleb Crain, in the *New Yorker* (June 14, 2018) quotes data from a survey by the Department of Labor's American Time Use that suggests the average American is reading less than ever before.

This was followed up by Josephine Tovey, associate news editor at Guardian Australia, in her piece in *The Guardian* (Oct. 2, 2019) entitled, "*Before the internet broke my attention span, I read books compulsively. Now, it takes willpower.*" Many of us who are, or once were, voracious readers of entire books can identify with the predicament in Tovey's title. However, the irony is that if we consider our daily habits, it is probably not that we are reading less, but just reading *fewer books*. Indeed, one could argue that we are actually reading *more* than ever before. Tovey reluctantly accedes to this irony in her article:

"Technically, people like me aren't reading less. I'm reading all the time — from the news alerts that greet me when I wake up, to the papers I get across each morning for my job as a news editor, and the endless mix of articles, emails, tweets and messages that fill my waking hours. But it's the deep, disconnected reading of books that can slip from grasp."

Tovey goes on to describe colourfully how her 'addiction' often gets the better of her even when she finds a book engrossing, something many of us can identify with:

"Even with a cracking book, I can find my hand wandering for my phone, my thumb unlocking it and scrolling through some app, like a lab rat with her little paw on the cocaine lever."

In Defence of Digital Media Learning

Proponents of the use of mobile technology in learning recognise the many benefits that Mobile Learning and its subsets, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) offer young learners both inside the classroom and in social contexts, beyond (in the case of MALL) simple portability:

"Mobile technologies offer a new paradigm in connectivity, communication and collaboration in our everyday lives. For education, these are huge opportunities to provide an experience that is relevant and engaging." (McQuiggan et al, 2015, p. 7)

In their book, *Mobile Learning: A Handbook for Developers, Educators, and Learners* (2015), McQuiggan and his co-authors argue strongly in favour of a mobile-centred approach to classroom learning and a closer collaboration between developers of mobile apps and K-12 school teachers, while urging all the parties deliberately mentioned in the book's title to "*...get on the same page when it comes to the opportunities and challenges of educating students in a digital world.*"

Walker and White (2013) sing the praises of *technology enhanced language learning* in their book of the same name by pointing to the simple model proposed by Scott Taylor (1980) as a synthesis of the many benefits that mobile technology has to offer, in this case, the language learner. The model defines the three major roles of technologies in learning, those of *tutor*, *tutee* and *tool*. Taylor's focus is on the use of computers, but the concepts he describes can also be applied to mobile technology and neatly encapsulate the key pedagogical elements of digital media.

According to Taylor, as *tutor*, the technology adopts the traditional role of teacher in helping the learner through a series of review and consolidation exercises including language practice drills.

As *tutee*, the process is reversed. Effectively, the learner teaches the technology, that is, he/she creates information and articulates his/her own knowledge. This can be done not only by computer programming, but also by recording on or writing

directly to the device or through the device to communicate knowledge, instruction or information to others in the form of a blog, for example, or other published work.

The third role, that of *tool*, is where the technology is used as a means to an end. Technology here can be used in countless ways to enhance learning. With the arrival of both the internet and various digital media devices, most notably the smartphone, Walker and White (2013, p. 5) explain,

“...since Taylor developed his theory of roles... the role of tool has been extended into one that mediates communication and interactions between people.”

As we can see, the use of digital technology in the classroom is a controversial issue and the numerous pros and cons of it take the discussion far beyond the few discussed here. However, considering the inexorable advance of digital technology and its ubiquity in today’s world and the predicted further increase of mobile technology use worldwide in the years to come, it seems clear that Mobile Learning is here to stay.

Mobile Device and Social Media Usage

The London-based market research firm, the Radicati Group, Inc. predicts that the number of mobile devices in use worldwide will increase from an estimated 13.09 billion in 2019 to almost 17 billion in the next four years (Chart 1), while the number of users of smartphones alone is forecast to reach approximately 3.8 billion in 2021, up from 2.5 billion in 2016 (Chart 2).

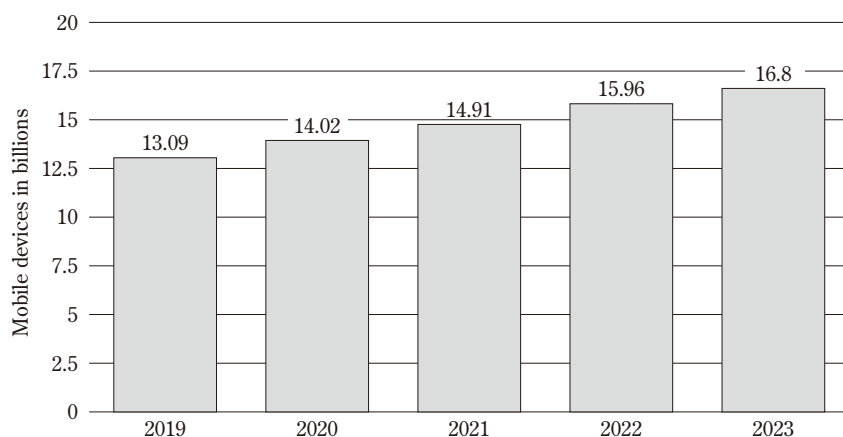


Chart 1: Forecast number of mobile devices worldwide from 2019 to 2023

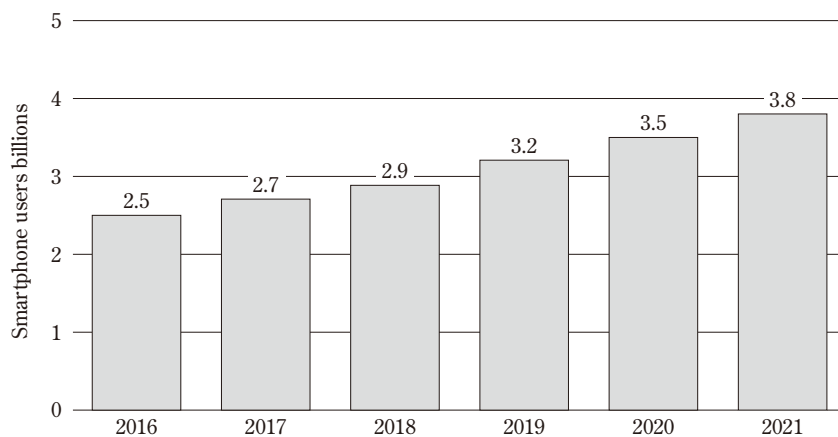


Chart 2: Forecast number of smartphone users worldwide from 2016 to 2021

Data reference: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/245501/multiple-mobile-device-ownership-worldwide/>

The Pew Research Centre revealed its findings of a 2018 survey of social media use among American teens that showed clearly how social media use dominates the lives of young people. According to the data (see Chart 3 below), 85% of U.S. teens say they use YouTube, 72% Instagram and 69% Snapchat, while only 3% of teens shy away from social media altogether.

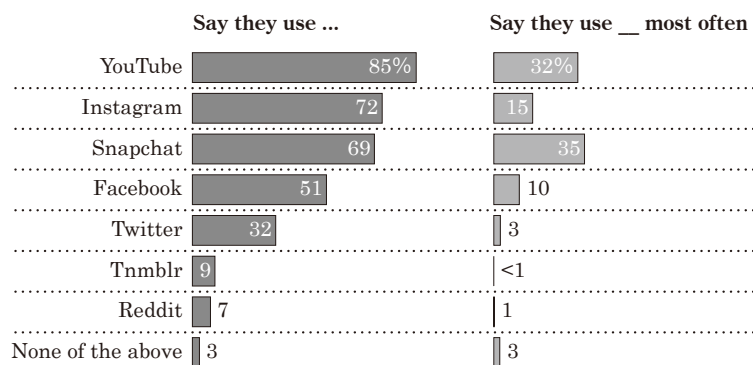


Chart 3: Percentage of U.S. teens who in 2018...

Data reference: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/>

It is safe to say that in today’s digital media world where young people are exposed regularly and broadly to media platforms that channel information, news and other data through media outlets owned by profit-seeking organisations, that young people need, more than ever before, to become media literate if they are to become mature and responsible consumers of media. The teaching of critical media literacy can help young people to ultimately make rational and well-informed decisions, especially later in life, in both political and social contexts. These include making the ‘right’ and ethical choices at the ballot box or responding appropriately and responsibly to social injustices and illegal or anti-social practices.

Being media-literate has been described as “*a twenty-first-century survival skill*” (Smith, 2015, p. 5) or as Buckingham puts it, “*In this context, media literacy is a fundamental life skill: we cannot function without it.*” (2019, p. 30)

All of this implies that educators—and this includes parents and guardians—are required to assume a new role, that of *media educator*, and with social media now dominating the lives of young people as we can see from the data above, it is clear that media literacy education can play a vital role in social studies.

The largest professional association in the United States devoted to social studies education, the National Council of Social Studies (<https://www.socialstudies.org>) points out that social studies educators are

“... uniquely qualified and situated to enable young people to effectively use mobile technologies as a citizen, learner, and member of a democratic society in a global setting and to explore the civic, economic, and social implications of such technologies across time and place.”

Attaining proficiency in media literacy then seems to be a requirement for becoming what we might refer to as a ‘digital citizen’ of today. Digital technologies and global networks now afford us a “*...newfound power to communicate, create, and participate...*” and with this “*...comes the responsibility to use these tools and networks responsibly.*” (Gallagher, 2014, p. 174)

Gallagher goes on to make another important observation in relation to how new technologies have led to young people engaging in modern media practices never before confronted by educators. He explains,

“Media literacy has not had to deal with the ethics and responsibilities of children as media creators before, simply because the tools only recently began to permit the easy creation and global distribution of media messages.” (Ibid.)

The implication here is that these technologies and networks are constantly creating new opportunities and space for

young people to exploit for the first time and as educators, we need to find new ways in which to incorporate these technologies into our media literacy classrooms. For if we fail to do this, then we risk alienating our young learners since they will undoubtedly pursue the new and exciting possibilities that these technologies present on their own and in their own time.

In other words, the tide has turned and we need to be equipped to deal with the consequences. We can no longer procrastinate or argue against digital technologies nor rail against popular culture being an integral part of the learning environment. Instead it is important that we be progressive and proactive and learn to embrace these technologies and put them to the best use we possibly can while being aware of the potential risks that they may pose. Hobbs (2011, P. 6), puts it in the following way:

“Educators can’t afford to ignore or trivialize the complex social, intellectual, and emotional functions of media and popular culture in the lives of young people. In order to reach today’s learners, educators need to be responsive to students’ experience with their culture—which is what they experience through television, movies, YouTube, the Internet, Facebook, music, and gaming.”

Part 3: How should we approach the teaching and learning of media literacy?

“As I see it, the best things schools can do for kids is to help them learn how to distinguish useful talk from bullshit. ...Every day in almost every way people are exposed to more bullshit than is healthy for them to endure.”

Postman (In Hobbs, 2011, p. 35)

This typically blunt declaration from the author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, a severe critique of the role of television in our everyday lives, made at the National Council of Teachers of English Conference in Washington DC in 1969, still rings true today on many political fronts.

Not least in the United States and the United Kingdom since the inauguration of the first U.S. ‘Twitter president’, Donald Trump, in 2016 and the outrageous promises made in the name of Brexit (a portmanteau coined to describe the UK’s exit from the EU that same year), which subsequently led to its primary proponent and fibber-in-chief, Boris Johnson, assuming the position of prime minister three years later.

In June, 2017, in an article entitled *Trump’s Lies*, David Leonhardt and Stuart A. Thompson of the New York Times compiled a lengthy list of lies directly attributed to the president of the United States. The list can be accessed here: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/23/opinion/trumps-lies.html>

Leonhardt and Thompson make the following astonishing claim:

“Trump told a public lie on at least 20 of his first 40 days as president. But based on a broader standard — one that includes his many misleading statements (like exaggerating military spending in the Middle East) — Trump achieved something remarkable: He said something untrue, in public, every day for the first 40 days of his presidency. The streak didn’t end until March 1.”

Making sense of it all

Hobbs (2011, p. 12) likens the vast field of digital and media literacy to “...a huge constellation of stars in the universe”, each star representing a certain skill or competency. As I alluded to in the introduction of this paper, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the vastness of the media literacy “constellation” and the danger is that we may end up concentrating on only a small manageable part of it.

However, Hobbs believes that the best approach is to take note of the five essential skills of digital and media literacy that

“...*spiral together in an interconnected way*,” thus creating the metaphorical constellation.

The first is the ability to **access** “...*appropriate and relevant information*” making full and best use of the technology available.

The second is to use critical thinking in order to **analyse** various features of the media message, including its purpose, its target audience and the credibility and veracity of the message or the idea contained within it.

The third is to **create** content “...*using creativity and confidence in self-expression, with awareness of purpose, audience, and composition techniques*.”

The fourth is to **reflect** upon both the technology available to us and the media messages we are exposed to and those we create, while “...*applying social responsibility and ethical principles to our own identity, communication behavior, and conduct*.”

The fifth skill is to **act**. According to Hobbs, this involves

“...working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, the workplace, and the community, and participating as a member of a community at local, regional, and international levels.”

We’re all in this together

In his best-selling classic, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire, regarded by many as the father of critical pedagogy, insists that true dialogue is an illusion unless “...*the dialoguers engage in critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits no dichotomy between them*.” (Freire, 2017, p. 92)

Freire contends that a prerequisite to real dialogue is critical thinking, and that only such dialogue can then, in turn, generate critical thinking.

Central to Freire’s philosophy is the necessity for each of us to develop a critical awareness of how we see ourselves in the world and how we interact with the world around us. In the 50th anniversary of Freire’s classic work, Donald Macedo of the University of Massachusetts neatly sums up Freire’s goal, which is to

“...launch the development of an emancipatory pedagogical process that invites and challenges students, through critical literacies, to learn how to negotiate the world in which they find themselves, in a thoughtful and critically reflective manner, so as to expose and engage the tensions and contradictions inherent in the ongoing relations between the oppressor and the oppressed.” Macedo (in Freire, 2017, p. 1)

Freire’s stance begs the question: What is the role of the media literacy instructor? I often find myself playing the devil’s advocate in my seminars and workshops, in my mind ‘helping’ learners to look at a particular argument or dilemma from various perspectives. By doing so, it is possible that I may inadvertently be guiding them towards a particular way of looking at an issue and thereby imposing my own worldview upon them. This is something all educators must be aware of.

Michael L. Fisher (in Jacobs, 2014, p. 5) on teaching digital media literacy says that as educators in the modern digital world, “...*we need to learn one of the most difficult lessons of modern teaching practice: relinquishing control*.” Fisher adds, “*Information no longer lives within the teacher or even within the school. It lives everywhere, which means learning must happen everywhere*.”

Outcomes

In the fourth edition of *Media Literacy, Keys to Interpreting Media Messages*, Silverblatt and his co-authors devote the final chapter to outlining a series of outcomes that might result from gaining more knowledge about media and media literacy. Among these, the following personal outcomes are listed:

- Becoming well informed on matters of media coverage.
- Maintaining a “balanced media diet” with regard to different ideological perspectives and different media, which emphasize different aspects of content.
- Becoming aware of your everyday contact with the media and media influence on your lifestyles, attitudes, behaviors and values.
- Applying media analysis tools.
- Examining media programming to learn about cultural attitudes, values, behaviors, preoccupations, and myths.
- Developing an awareness of programming as a text that furnishes perspectives into cultural changes.
- Promoting discussions about the media industry, media programming, and issues with friends, colleagues and children.

(Silverblatt et al, 2014 pp. 499, 500)

Among the other outcomes listed are Media Activism, Organizational Activism and Grassroots Organizing. The Praeger Handbook of Media Literacy, Volume 1 (2014, p. 303) claims that one of the criticisms of the media is that it has taken a “*too active role*” in promoting social activism, and this is one aspect that educators need to be aware of. However, for many media literacy advocates, one of the principal roles of media literacy is to politicize or even militarize an otherwise lethargic and indifferent youth. But Fry (2000) asks: Should this

“...be the purpose of all media literacy education? To prepare for real-world, absolute push back? Or is that the purpose of only some kind of media literacy education, in some circumstances, for some people? Or should that never be the purpose? Should we think of media literacy education as a shield, not a sword?”

This brings us to the debate of *empowerment versus protectionism*. Is it the role of the educator to empower the learner to use critical analysis skills as a weapon with which to bring about social change? Or, as the protectionists believe, should we use such skills as a shield with which to protect ourselves and vulnerable people around us who cannot protect themselves against unscrupulous media disseminators?

The debate itself presents an ideal learning opportunity—the perfect starting point for a classroom discussion on the role of media literacy in society and the roles of educator and student.

For it is indeed essential that both instructor and learner work together to deal with issues of this kind without the instructor imposing his/her ideas and philosophies on the learner. Let us recall what Freire said in this regard:

It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. Freire (2017, p. 96)

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to synthesize the salient points of media literacy education with a view to creating a practical course that encapsulates the key elements that students of media literacy, and in particular those embarking on media education for the first time, need to be aware of in order to further their understanding of media and of the importance of media literacy education.

Therefore, I feel it appropriate to conclude the paper with an outline of the course that my research and observations helped to generate thereby achieving my prime objective and at the same time summarizing the key points of this paper.

The course title shall inherit the title of this paper.

It will be a 15-unit course, each unit comprising of 90 minutes and recommended for implementation in a university or

college environment.

The course will be divided, as is the paper, into three sections, each based on the three principal questions asked above. Required reading and references will be added in each section.

Understanding the Power of Media and the Importance of Media Literacy in the Digital Age

An English media literacy course for undergraduate students.

Section 1: Lessons 1–5

Lesson 1	Main Theme	What constitutes media? Part 1.
	Key Words	Defining Media
	Lesson outline	Read and discuss: Buckingham, D.(2019). The Media Education Manifesto, Chapter 1: A Changing Media Environment.
	Tasks	Students brainstorm definitions of media and combine their ideas to create an original working definition.
Lesson 2	Main Theme	What constitutes media? Part 2.
	Key Words	Embedded values
	Lesson outline	Read and discuss: Pernisco, N.(2015). Practical Media Literacy (2nd Edition)Chapter 1: What is Media Literacy?
	Tasks	Students access and share media messages and work together to extrapolate any hidden or embedded meaning.
Lesson 3	Main Theme	What constitutes media? Part 3.
	Key Words	Channels and Platforms
	Lesson outline	Read and discuss: Silverblatt, A. et al.(2014). Media Literacy: Keys to interpreting media messages - fourth edition. Overview: Elements of Communication, pp. 17–20
	Tasks	Students make a list of the channels and platforms they use daily and compare.
Lesson 4	Main Theme	What constitutes media? Part 4.
	Key Words	Media types and Media Connectivity
	Lesson outline	Students analyse and discuss the diagram of media interconnectivity in Part 1 of: Lia, S.Understanding the Power of Media and the Importance of Media Literacy in the Digital Age.
	Tasks	Students create a diagramu of their own personal media use and connect each media form accordingly and compare.
Lesson 5	Main Theme	What constitutes media? – A Review
	Key Words	Defining Media /Embedded Values / Channels and Platforms / Media types and Media Connectivity
	Lesson outline	Presentation
	Tasks	Pre-class: Students form 4 groups. Each group is assigned one of the four issues studied in lessons 1–4 and prepares a review presentation to show the class.

As we can see from section 1, each section of the course is based on one of the three key questions posed in the paper, and each lesson takes one of the issues dealt with in that section and expands on it through the required reading sections and discussion sessions.

The suggested tasks can be prepared by students in class or beforehand, in which case this is indicated by the term ‘Pre-class’.

Every 5th lesson is used as a review where the students ‘peer-teach’ by providing a review and feedback on each of the topics covered in the form of a class presentation.

Sections 2 and 3, below, follow the same pattern.

Section 2: Lessons 6–10

Lesson 6	Main Theme	Why is it especially important to be media literate in today's digital media age? Part 1.
	Key Words	A Digital Media Age
	Lesson outline	Read and discuss: Jacobs, H. (2014). Mastering Digital Literacy. Defining the Foundations of Literacy, pp. 6–10
	Tasks	Students are given a chart that displays an array of digital media devices and online programs and apps. They discuss which they are familiar with and which they know or don't know how to use.
Lesson 7	Main Theme	Why is it especially important to be media literate in today's digital media age? Part 2.
	Key Words	Digital Media Dependence
	Lesson outline	Read and discuss: Carr, Nicholas. (2010). The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember. Chapter 8, The Church of Google, pp. 149–157
	Tasks	Students make a list of all the Google searches they can remember ever making and compare and discuss.
Lesson 8	Main Theme	Why is it especially important to be media literate in today's digital media age? Part 3.
	Key Words	Mobile Technology in Teaching and MALL
	Lesson outline	Read and discuss: Walker, A. and White, G. (2013). Technology Enhanced Language Learning: Connecting Theory and Practice. Computer Assisted Language Learning, pp. 1–3.
	Tasks	Pre-lesson: Students are split into two opposing groups, the pros and the cons and conduct a debate on the use of CALL and MALL in the classroom.
Lesson 9	Main Theme	Why is it especially important to be media literate in today's digital media age? Part 4
	Key Words	Social Network Services and Smartphones
	Lesson outline	Students analyse and discuss the charts relating to mobile device use and smartphone ownership worldwide in Part 2 of: Lia, S. Understanding the Power of Media and the Importance of Media Literacy in the Digital Age.
	Tasks	Pre-lesson: Students keep track of their SNS and smartphone use over the course of a week and compare their habits in class.
Lesson 10	Main Theme	Why is it especially important to be media literate in today's digital media age? – A Review
	Key Word	A Digital Media Age/Digital Media Dependence/Mobile Technology in Teaching and MALL/Social Network Services and Smartphones
	Lesson outline	Presentation
	Tasks	Pre-class: Students form 4 groups. Each group is assigned one of the four issues studied in lessons 6–9 and prepares a review presentation to show the class.

Section 3: Lessons 11–15

Lesson 11	Main Theme	How should we approach the teaching and learning of media literacy? Part 1.
	Key Words	Accessing, Analysing and Interpreting Media Messages
	Lesson outline	Read and discuss: Hobbs, R. (2011). Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture and Classroom, pp. 11–19.
	Tasks	Students access a news story, analyse it and write their interpretation of the messages in it. They share and discuss their interpretations.
Lesson 12	Main Theme	How should we approach the teaching and learning of media literacy? Part 2.
	Key Words	Creating Media Content
	Lesson outline	Read and discuss: Gallagher, F. (2014). Media literacy education: A requirement for today’s digital citizens in Media literacy education in action: Theoretical and pedagogical perspectives. pp. 173–175
	Tasks	Students make a list of any media content that they have created (such as an edited photo or video uploaded to Instagram etc.) and compare and discuss their motives and content creation tools and methods.
Lesson 13	Main Theme	How should we approach the teaching and learning of media literacy? Part 3.
	Key Words	Outcomes
	Lesson outline	Read and discuss: Silverblatt, A, (2014), Media Literacy: Keys to interpreting media messages – fourth edition. Chapter 13, pp. 499–503
	Tasks	Pre-lesson: Students form groups and select the outcomes from Silverblatt that they can relate to. Each group is then quizzed in turn by the rest of the class on their choices.
Lesson 14	Main Theme	How should we approach the teaching and learning of media literacy? Part 4.
	Key Words	Empowerment versus Protectionism
	Lesson outline	Read and discuss: Fry, K.G. (2014). What are we really teaching? Outline for an activist media literacy education in Media literacy education in action: Theoretical and pedagogical perspectives, pp. 125–129
	Tasks	Pre-lesson: Students are split into two opposing groups, one in favor of empowerment and the other in favor of protectionism and conduct a debate in the classroom.
Lesson 15	Main Theme	How should we approach the teaching and learning of media literacy? – A Review
	Key Words	Accessing, Analysing and Interpreting Media Messages / Creating Media Content / Outcomes / Empowerment versus Protectionism
	Lesson outline	Presentation
	Tasks	Pre-class: Students form 4 groups. Each group is assigned one of the four issues studied in lessons 11–14 and prepares a review presentation to show the class.

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