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MEDIA LITERACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: UNDERSTANDING ITS IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Aykut Ozel
Orcid ID : 0000-0003-3790-2633

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ABSTRACT

In our global information society, teaching students to read and write with letters and numbers is insufficient. We live in a multimedia age where what people learn rarely comes from printed sources and more commonly from high-quality visuals, complex sound editing, different media formats, etc. Entertainment that used to be available only in a book or a movie is now available in multiple formats and on different levels with countless interactions and commerce.

Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content across various platforms, empowering individuals to navigate the complex information landscape of the digital age. This skill is increasingly recognized as essential for fostering informed citizenship and critical thinking in an era marked by the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation.

Whether you're reading news, scrolling through social media, or even watching a movie, media literacy plays a part. It impacts how you interpret what you read, ensure the accuracy of what you share, and comprehend underlying messages in everyday media consumption.

In today's fast-paced digital age, information is not just overwhelming, every swipe and scroll introduces new deluge of content. But how do you distinguish between fact and fluff? That's where media literacy steps in. It's like having a map for the wild terrain of information.

KEYWORDS: *media literacy, digital age, teaching*

DEFINING MEDIA LITERACY

Today, most people get most of their information from complex text, images, and sounds. We must navigate this complex media environment, create meaning from the barrage of media messages that rain down on us every day, and express ourselves using a variety of media tools and technologies. Much of the consensus is that individuals are taught that media messages are constructed and that it is important to be able to analyze content and messages.

There is no clear definition of media literacy. Academics have defined media literacy in various ways depending on the main topic they are addressing. Information and media literacy skills are actively researched today, and their definitions vary from researcher to researcher.

The European Commission defines media literacy as follows: Media literacy is the ability to access media, critically evaluate different aspects of media and their content, and to create communications in a variety of contexts. Media literacy is relevant to all media types, including television, film, radio, music, print, the Internet and other new digital communication technologies. It is a key competence not only for young people but also for adults and seniors, parents, teachers and media professionals. The Commission considers media literacy to be an important factor for active citizenship in today's information society. (Commission of the European Communities, 2007).

According to Potter (2013), media literacy is the perspective used effectively in interpreting the messages we see while following the media.

Kellner and Share (2005) defined media literacy as certain skills and knowledge required to read, interpret and produce media texts.

Media literacy is a set of skills that anyone can learn. Just as literacy is the ability to read and write, media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media messages of all kinds. These are essential skills in today's world.

THE ROLE OF MEDIA LITERACY IN EDUCATION

Why critical media literacy? Critical media literacy deepens the potential of education to critically analyze the relationship between media and audience, knowledge and power, and broadens the concept of literacy to encompass diverse forms of mass communication and popular culture. It provides individuals with access to an understanding of how the print and non-print texts which part of everyday life construct are and shape our knowledge and understanding, and impose the various social, economic, and political situations we take for granted in the world (Alvermann, Moon and Hagood 1999; Luke, 1999).

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Children spend an average of eight hours and thirty-three minutes each day exposed to media (Primack, Gold, Land, & Fine, 2006). Children are exposed to media in a wide variety of media formats each day, including television, Internet advertisements, billboards, email, radio, magazines, company websites, cooperative sponsors at events, and advertisements on buses, taxis, and cars (NCI, 2008). The media has the power to shape how students see themselves and how society functions. The images, people, and places presented on television go into the viewer's thought process and transform them into students. This happens whether the viewer realizes it or not. Now, just like a course that students take during the school year, the media has a school, district, and state curriculum. When a viewer starts watching a program, it is likely that television and movies will expand the socially produced stereotypes. However, when the viewer is not able to watch the programs with a critical mindset and challenge the stereotypes presented, this learning can turn into questions. Viewers need to realize that they are in the classroom, learning as if they were in the classroom. A student who is experienced in critical media literacy will have the knowledge and tools to examine the media and images presented to them, understanding for themselves what to do with the information they will extract.

While critical media literacy emphasizes students gaining a better understanding of the images and themes in the media presented to them, the greatest benefit and purpose of these skills is the power they will have over students in the future. Critical media literacy is a tool they can use long after they leave the traditional classroom environment. The primary reasons for media literacy education are to acquire skills in information management, to understand the possible effects of media use, and to increase the potential for democratic discourse.

Teachers who acquire media literacy skills can become more effective disseminators of information, bridge the gap between societal and classroom curricula, and become powerful critical consumers (Harris & Bargh, 2009; Kellner, 1998). As von Feilitzen (1999) points out, the challenge today is not to teach, but to make learning happen. To educate in today's world is to reach young people and help them discover their way through media through today's educational tool, the Internet.

We learn about issues in our society and the world from media discourses more than from any other source of education (Macedo & Steinberg 2007), making media literacy fundamental to our relationship with difference, locally and globally. Most people are unaware of the ways they are educated and positioned by the media because media teachings tend to be "invisible and unconsciously acquired" (Kellner & Share 2007). Media literacy education helps students and teachers better understand and communicate in any subject, including math, science, technology, social studies, and language arts.

The consolidation and convergence of media has increasingly changed the way individuals, both consumers and citizens, access, process and communicate information locally, nationally and globally. Media industries and organizations influence public perception and increasingly take up more of our time at work and at home. Media literacy is beginning to be recognized as a 21st century skill essential for the development of civic competence and informed and responsible citizens. Media literacy is not just about producing with media but rather teaching media.

Classrooms that ignore the language of modern media and fail to help students recognize, read, and resist the powerful persuasiveness of visual messages leave students vulnerable to manipulation, no matter how skillfully they are versed in the print world. A media literate person is someone who uses awareness processing skills, analyzes, and interprets… It involves creating messages to express oneself, influence, and inform others. Media literacy can be a teaching tool that protects students from potential media manipulation while empowering them to become responsible citizens. It has been shown to be a companion in the classroom that engages students creatively in curriculum that is aligned with national standards and helps students develop the skills necessary for responsible citizenship, competent consumerism, and an increasingly technological workplace (Hobbs 2007).

The average teenager today spends more than eight hours a day with media outside of work or school (Rideout, Foehr & Roberts 2010), more than eight hours a day with screens (Stelter 2014), and social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook are growing exponentially. Such a simple statistic reinforces the need for youth and the public to find new and creative ideas for critically viewing, analyzing, and using information to communicate with small and large audiences. This means creating new spaces in the classroom for not only new approaches to media literacy education but also new places for such learning to take place. The average teenager today spends more than eight hours a day with media outside of work or school (Rideout, Foehr & Roberts 2010),), more than eight hours a day with screens (Stelter 2014), and social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook are growing exponentially. Such a simple statistic reinforces the need for youth and the public to find new and creative ideas for critically viewing, analyzing, and using information to communicate with small and large audiences. This means not only new approaches to media literacy education in classrooms but also new spaces for such learning to take place.

The National Communication Association reported that media literate individuals must understand how people use media in their personal and social lives and the commercial nature of media; see the complex relationship between audience and media

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content; and understand that media content is created in social and cultural contexts (URL-1).

Although traditional literacy is often associated with print-based communication and is seen as the ability to read and analyze written messages, the increasingly visual nature of society and the complexity of media messages demand that attention be paid to images, brands, and symbols in addition to text. The goal of media literacy education is not to avoid or reduce media use, but to encourage conscious use of media. Media literacy emphasizes both analyzing messages and creating media (Buckingham, 2003).

It is found that although three-year-old children were able to distinguish between commercials and television programs, they were incapable of understanding the selling motivations of commercials. Critical thinking about advertising does not appear to develop until adolescence. At this age, children tend to be skeptical of advertising but still cannot evaluate misleading claims (Linn et al., 1982).

The framework for media literacy education typically includes:

- Critical thinking and analysis
- Understanding of media formats and production
- Awareness of media influence and effects
- Ability to create and communicate through media
- Ethical considerations and social responsibility

WHY CRITICAL THINKING IS AT THE HEART OF MEDIA LITERACY

By teaching critical media literacy in the classroom, students have the chance to see why they are presented with information, how they receive it, and how they apply it to their lives. Schools can play an important role in reducing racist, sexist, anti-gay, and anti-social class stereotypes and controlling their impact on them as individuals. These skills provide students with the foundational knowledge needed to view popular media critically. Critical media literacy deepens the educational potential to critically analyze the relationship between media and audience, knowledge and power, and broadens the concept of literacy to encompass different types of mass communication and popular culture.

Why Media Literacy Now? The ubiquity of media is a fixture of students' daily lives; media create messages about society through their influence on leisure, perception, and judgment (Brown, 1998; Covington, 2004). Tyner (1998) stated that an informed public has always been considered essential to democratic societies. Using media as a teaching tool to develop critical thinking skills can sustain an educated, literate, and informed future (Hobbs, 2001; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000).

Media literacy empowers people to think critically and produce creatively with an increased range of images, language, and sound. Being literate in the media age requires critical thinking skills that will empower us to make decisions in the classroom, living room, workplace, boardroom, or voting booth. Critical media literacy encourages individuals to think critically; to incorporate analytical tools into media use; to examine the connection between media, individuals, and others; and to understand the role of media in identity formation (Buckingham, 1998; Lewis & Jhally, 1998).

Educating children about the effects of media should begin at the earliest possible age. The overarching goal of media literacy is to help young people learn the intent behind each media message and to teach them how to critically evaluate media. Media literacy is often used to strengthen reasoning-based information processing by teaching critical viewing skills and analyzing media images to de-emphasize affective information processing and to expose the unrealistic side of advertising. Students share a unique relationship with popular culture and popular media. With easy access, they are watching more television and movies than ever before. Students are connected, and we as educators must recognize this and give them the skills, they need to control what they absorb from media. Critical media literacy can give them the tools they need to better decipher and understand what they are constantly exposed to. Critical media literacy also aims to raise awareness of how media are influenced by commercial considerations and the impact this has on content, technique and distribution. Most media production is commercial and therefore must make a profit. Issues of ownership and control are central. What we watch, read and hear in the media is controlled by a very small number of people.

All media are advertisements that in some way make statements of values and lifestyles. Whether explicitly or implicitly, mainstream media convey ideological messages about the nature of the good life, the virtues of consumerism, the duties of men and women, and the acceptance of superiority. Critical thinking is allowing you to see beyond the surface and uncover deeper truths hidden in media messages.

CONCLUSION

Media literacy is a crucial 21st-century skill that empowers individuals to navigate the complex media environment critically and responsibly. As our world becomes increasingly mediated, the importance of media literacy will only continue to grow. Ongoing research, education, and policy efforts are essential to ensure that media literacy keeps pace with the evolving media landscape, ultimately fostering a more informed, engaged, and discerning society. Media messages affect how we think about events and how we act. Being media literate is being aware of the messages we receive and recognizing their impact on us. It is very difficult for one to be truly media literate because so many manipulative media messages are produced and there is no end to what we need to learn about the variety of media messages. Media literacy

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remains a critical competency in the digital age, requiring continued attention from educators, researchers, and policymakers. As media environments evolve, so too must our approaches to fostering critical engagement with media content.

In the jungle of media madness, media literacy is your compass, flashlight, and guide. It helps you traverse safely and intelligently, separating the vines of truth from the quicksand of deceit. As you practice these skills, you'll find yourself not just surviving but thriving in this information age. Let's stay sharp, stay informed, and keep questioning. After all, in a world filled with noise, clarity is your best friend. If schools hesitate to integrate critical media literacy into their curriculum, they fail to provide students with 21st century skills. Media use will continue to increase among students, which shows how important it is for students to acquire skills in media and critical analysis.

In conclusion, media literacy is an indispensable part of modern education, equipping individuals with the skills necessary to navigate an increasingly complex media landscape. By fostering critical thinking, ethical digital citizenship, and creative expression, media literacy empowers individuals to become informed, engaged, and responsible citizens. As we move forward in the digital age, the integration of media literacy into education will be crucial in shaping a society that values truth, transparency, and open dialogue.

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