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Chapter 18 'Media Literacy'

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Chapter 18

Media Literacy

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Introduction

Across Europe and beyond, the promotion of media literacy, for children and adults, has acquired an important public urgency. Traditional literacy is seen to be no longer sufficient for participation in today's society. Citizens need to be media literate, it is claimed, to enable them to cope more effectively with the flood of information in today's highly mediated societies. As teachers, politicians and policy makers everywhere struggle with this rapid shift in media culture, greater responsibility is placed on citizens for their own welfare in the new media environment. Media literacy is therefore all the more essential in enabling citizens to make sense of the opportunities available to them and to be alerted to the risks involved.

How media literacy might be achieved is the subject of this chapter. Three main themes are addressed. Firstly, we examine how media literacy has been defined with particular reference to the growing importance of *digital* literacy. Secondly, we examine how media literacy has been adopted within policy frameworks as a response to rapid technological change. Thirdly, we critique the 'technological literacy' that dominates much of the current policy agenda (Hasebrink, Livingstone et al. 2007), and argue for a new approach based on better knowledge about children and young people's media and internet habits.

Defining media literacy

The debate about what media literacy means is a longstanding one. It is frequently acknowledged as a good thing, though we are not always agreed on what it is (O'Neill and Barnes 2008). A growing consensus around its key conceptual parameters is emerging with the definition – 'the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts' - widely accepted as an agreed definition (Livingstone 2004: 5). Drawing on Aufderheide (1997), the objective of media literacy, so defined, is a 'critical autonomy relationship to all media' organized around a set of common beliefs or precepts recognising that the media are constructed and that they have commercial, ideological and political implications. Digital literacy is one of a host of new literacies (Coiro, Knobel et al. 2007), including computer or technological literacy associated with the Information Society (see Commission of the European Communities 2009) which now join the debate on the need for media literacy.

It is important to remember that the concept of literacy itself remains a contested one (Luke 1989; Livingstone 2004). Referring traditionally to reading and writing ability, literacy carries advantages and disadvantages when used in the context of media or digital literacy (Livingstone 2008). Positively, it draws on a rich tradition of extending access to knowledge and culture. More negatively, the term does not always translate from education to policy discourses, neither does it always translate well into other languages. The equivalent Norwegian terms, for instance, *digital kompetanse* and *mediekompetanse*, both refer to more technical aspects of literacy. Digital literacy in its popular English usage is similarly associated with competence

or skill and loses the original sense of reading and writing. Buckingham's reference to *digital media literacy* (2007), his preferred term, foregrounds literacy as the outcome – in terms of acquired knowledge and skills – in contrast to media education, which he defines as the process of teaching and learning about media.

An assumption of digital media literacy is that children and young people should be equipped with the necessary critical and conceptual tools that allow them to deal with, rather than be protected from, the media culture that surrounds them. Drawing on Bazalgette (1989), Buckingham (2007) argues that the aim of digital media literacy is to ensure that young people are able to both understand and participate in the media, and in so doing secure their democratic rights. As now widely promoted, digital literacy further assumes that such competence is vital for our lives and for society (Commission of the European Communities 2007b). The internet as a common network for information, communication, entertainment and trade extends such social interaction to a global level.

To explore the different dimensions of this debate, it is worth examining briefly the four key components of the definition of media literacy: to be able to *access*, *analyse*, *evaluate* and *create* messages in a variety of communication contexts.

Access: this refers in the first instance to the skills and competences required to find media content. With digital literacy, the focus is often on its functional aspects - whether people have physical access or not to the internet, or are able operate a personal computer and navigate websites to do very basic functions. The major

concern has been with the so-called digital divide. As observed by Livingstone (2004), however, evaluating and using available media content and services are dynamic social processes for which hardware provision alone is insufficient. For Buckingham (2007), access similarly includes the ability to self-regulate media use through awareness of the potential risks involved. In this context, the internet is a highly complex technological system, but it is also extremely accessible in the sense of being easy to use. However, while it may be very easy to get onto the internet, more sophisticated uses require higher degrees of competence (Gentikow, 2009).

Analyse: analysis goes beyond the ability to decode audio visual media messages (Hall 1980). While knowledge of genre and media rhetorical strategies is useful, analysis also requires 'being competent in and motivated toward relevant cultural traditions and values' (Livingstone 2004: 6). Analysis also includes being able to deconstruct production processes, issues of media ownership, institutional power, and media representations (Buckingham, 2007). Livingstone (2004), building on Bazalgette (1989) and Buckingham (2003), suggests that insight into questions of media agency, media categories, media technologies, media languages, media audiences, and media representations are central elements of analytic competence, but crucially are categories that need to be adjusted for new media.

Evaluate: evaluation is a key aspect of digital literacy sometimes overlooked in favour of technical dimensions. Evaluation requires critical and analytical skills, but also knowledge of the cultural, political, economic and historical context in which the particular content is produced. Given the extraordinary breadth of opinion, information and propaganda on the internet, the ability to question authority and to

assess objectivity and trustworthiness is critical. Livingstone puts it eloquently: 'Imagine the World Wide Web user who cannot distinguish dated, biased, or exploitative sources, unable to select intelligently when overwhelmed by an abundance of information and services' (2004: 6).

Create: this refers to the ability to use different media tools to communicate, to produce content for self-expression, to participate in public debates and to interact with others. A defining feature of so-called 'web 2.0' both in terms of the accessibility of communication channels and the wide availability of everyday media production technologies, a veneer of easy access may mask an underlying complexity in which media education has a central role to play. Buckingham (2007) notes growing research that suggests that children experience empowerment as a result of being able to represent their own experiences and concerns through media creation. Practical production is a first step, but children and young people need to be familiar with and master different cultural forms of expression and communication in order to become effective readers and writers in the digital age. Erstad (2008) refers to 'trajectories of remixing' as an important aspect of content creation and the increased possibilities offered by the world wide web to enable young people to remix content and create something new, not predefined.

What then distinguishes digital literacy over media literacy or the literacy required to read written texts or television for that matter? On one level, the additional elements of interactivity, hypertextuality and multimedia suggest new modes of reading beyond the linear conventions of print and audiovisual media. Beyond this, however, media literacy in the digital context must also incorporate the full range of

users' engagement with digital media from information searching, entertainment and game playing, to communicating and creating content, and not the received versions of literacy inherited from print or audiovisual literacy. While useful as a starting point, the imperative for digital media literacy is to learn from users' actual experience, and to develop on the basis of evidence of everyday experience the modalities of media literacy in the digital environment.

Buckingham (2007) emphasizes that definitions of literacy are necessarily challenging as they have normative and evaluative implications for questions of power and control and need to be open to negotiation and debate. Digital literacy has a critical potential, for example, if taken to include the economic and political forces that have shaped the development of the internet as well as the commercial pressures within which it operates. At its best, digital media literacy can provide young people with reading, writing, evaluative and creative skills that are a fundamental basis for empowerment in today's society. Yet within the policy realm, all too often literacy loses this sense of democratizing potential (Livingstone 2008), and instead is restricted to more limited objectives.

Media literacy and public policy

While communication in a societal context has always been a central feature of the concept of media literacy, only more recently has it become a matter of public policy. The responsibility of the United Kingdom's media regulator, Ofcom, to promote media literacy provides one of the first European examples of a recognition of the state's duty to encourage a better public understanding and awareness of media content and processes (Ofcom 2004). This arises in the context of wider trends in

media regulation away from efforts to control the market in which media industries operate to a model of co- or self-regulation whereby media industries themselves are viewed as best suited to managing the provision of media content (Penman and Turnbull 2007). In an increasingly complex environment of new distribution channels and modes of access, this 'lighter-touch' regulation is deemed more appropriate to harnessing the potential of new media platforms (Helberger 2007). The policy enabling such a liberalization of market conditions is most visibly expressed in the European Union's *Audiovisual Media Services Directive* (AVMS) in which a flexible regulatory system with fewer constraints on advertising and content will operate across Europe for existing and emerging audiovisual media services (Commission of the European Communities 2007c). As a counterbalance to the loosening of controls, the Directive promotes media literacy or 'skills, knowledge and understanding that allow consumers to use media effectively and safely'. Significantly, AVMS requires the European Commission to report on levels of media literacy in all member states from 2011 on.

In addition to AVMS, a number of other bodies involved with European media policy have adopted media literacy promotion as a strategic goal. The European Parliament, for instance, (*Recommendation of the European Parliament on the protection of minors and human dignity*, Council of the European Union 2006a) has advocated the development of national public awareness programmes, as well as training for professionals, teachers and child protection agencies on safe internet use in schools. They also emphasize specific internet training initiatives aimed at children, and an integrated educational approach aimed at using the internet responsibly. European policy on lifelong learning similarly emphasizes the confident and critical use of

information society technology among its key competencies (Council of the European Union 2006b). Similarly, the European Commission's communication on *Media Literacy in the Digital Environment* in 2008 advocates greater promotion of media literacy as a social and educational priority (Commission of the European Communities 2007b). Specifically, it invites European member states to ensure that all appropriate authorities promote media literacy, encourage research and awareness-raising of the use of ICT by young people, and promote media literacy within the framework of lifelong learning.

In parallel with this sometimes surprising adoption of media literacy within media policy frameworks ostensibly geared towards market liberalization (Goodwin and Spittle 2002), there is a growing consensus that media or digital literacy is best understood through the lens of human rights (Frau-Meigs 2006). The 60th anniversary in 2008 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides one such context for foregrounding rights-based policies on the protection of minors and the promotion of citizens' interests in the digital environment. The Council of Europe, for instance, has proposed separate policies on the public service value of the internet (2007a), empowering children in the new communications environment (2006), and promoting freedom of expression and information (2007b). Such policy interventions have acted as a call to arms for 'a coherent information literacy and training strategy which is conducive to empowering children and their educators in order for them to make the best possible use of information and communication services and technologies' (Council of Europe 2006).

Historically, UNESCO's support for media literacy has also been decisive having

initiated the concept of media education in the 1970s and argued for its adoption by all developed countries (Zgrabljic-Rotar 2006: 10). The Grünwald Declaration of 1982 provided the first platform for concerted international action on media education (UNESCO 1982) and UNESCO continues to promote media and information literacy as an integral part of people's life-long learning.

Media literacy in the digital environment

Despite this enhanced profile, media literacy in its current formulation retains a number of unresolved tensions, such as its technological bias and the 'light touch' regulation of which it has become a part. In the first case, digital literacy is frequently characterized by a strong underlying technological bias, evident for instance in the European Commission's communication on *Media Literacy in the Digital Environment*, the first formal statement of media literacy policy at a European level. Drawing on i2010, the EU policy for a strong internal European market place for information society and media services, media literacy is linked closely with acquisition of technical skills, and suggests that better knowledge and understanding of how media work in the digital world will lead to wider take-up of ICT, and thus help Europe become a global leader in media and information technologies.

This technology bias is repeated in the widely promoted notion of digital literacy as user competence, reinforced by the need to measure attainment in quantitative form (Ala-Mutka, Punie et al. 2008). Relatedly, there is an expectation that children and young people as the subjects of media literacy are the new experts or pioneers in the digital age (Tapscott 1999; Prensky 2001). Because young people are so immersed in technology, it is sometimes assumed that this new generation possesses sophisticated

skills and requires a qualitatively different approach to traditional education (see Buckingham 1998). In contrast, we concur with Dunkels (2005) that it is essential to avoid romanticizing children's competence, while at the same time acknowledging their experiences and skills with regard to digital media. Children's experiences and opinions about the internet are quite different from adults and highlight the gap in knowledge between young people as internet users and adults who make up the rules and control its access.

The second aspect of concern with media literacy, currently defined, is the 'light touch' regulation within which it is framed. Whether in relation to codes of practice for internet service providers or with regard to classification of video game content (the PEGI rating system), the model of European media regulation is one of voluntary co- or self-regulation, invariably prioritising the needs of industry over citizens or consumers. Like many aspects of European policy, media literacy is also subject to the subsidiarity principle where individual member states make provision for media literacy at a local or national level. As a consequence, media literacy efforts remains dispersed and uncoordinated, and dependent on individual organizations to promote it, varying according to the availability of resources and the prevailing cultural and political environment.

Conclusion

The high profile of media literacy in policy discussions arises in the context of wide-ranging debates about social inclusion in the information society - ensuring no one is left behind in a fast-moving technological landscape - as well as in relation to growing concerns about the implications of greatly increased access to unregulated content and

potentially harmful material, particularly on the internet. In addressing these concerns, there is a danger particularly in the case of digital literacy that an all too narrow approach may be adopted, restricted to measurable aspects of digital competence or technical skill. The expectation is that these skills will be developed within the school context, with teachers being trained for the task. However, the overriding interests of current policy suggest that the outcomes will more often than not be functional or instrumental. We argue that in order to move beyond the 'technological literacy' that dominates much of the current policy agenda, a new approach based on knowledge about children and young people's media and internet habits, and on research on media and digital literacy is required. This will necessitate a more developed curriculum on media and digital literacy for children to be able to benefit from the opportunities and to manoeuvre around the risks related to media and internet use.

It will be important in this context to reflect on whether the notion of digital literacy is in danger of becoming intertwined with norms for middle class childhood. Initiatives in support of digital literacy will have to consider broader processes of social inclusion and exclusion, particularly with respect to class and gender, and the danger that increased marginalization could result as an unintended side effect of school digital literacy programmes (Erstad, Sefton-Green & Nixon, 2009). Digital literacy is not a neutral empowering process but an entry point for a number of specific social opportunities.

The aim to create a flourishing digital literacy as advocated within European policy or by the Council of Europe (2006) remains an important and positive one. The ambition that all children should be familiarised with, and skilled in, the new

information and communications environment, have the necessary skills to create, produce and distribute content and communications, and that such skills should better enable them to deal with content that may be harmful in nature is one of the key educational priorities of our time. To be effective, such initiatives must have both a bottom-up and a top-down level of knowledge and input. On the one hand, media and digital literacy education needs to be based on children's actual experiences, needs and wishes, and informed by knowledge and research about how young people use ICTs and the internet. On the other hand, it also needs to be informed by relevant sociological perspectives of media and internet use, as well by robust ethical and legal understanding of the new communications environment. Prioritising curricula which encourage digital media literacy in the sense elaborated above poses an enormous challenge for educational policy makers and schools in an era of scarce public resources and ever increasing pressures for economic relevance. Yet, as Buckingham reminds us (2007), media education more than most other aspects of the curriculum, promotes skills and learning that have far reaching implications beyond the confines of the classroom and which go to the heart of exercising rights and freedoms in contemporary societies.

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