MICHAEL HOECHSMANN AND STUART R. POYNTZ

MEDIA LITERACIES

A Critical Introduction

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and
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Media Literacies

Preface

We live in remarkable times.

Who would have thought it possible even 10 years ago to write a book on a machine that unites all of the functionalities of a typewriter, a fax machine, a library archive, a book store, a telephone, a stereo, a television, a deck of cards, a photo album, a recording studio, and a video editing suite into a sleek and portable package? Sitting studiously with others in a public library, a café, or an airport departure lounge, we wonder what diversity of projects and practices are simultaneously taking place around us. As Michael Wesch so eloquently portrays in the YouTube video 'The Machine is Us/ing Us,' we have adopted cyberskins. If there was any doubt that we are cyborgs – part human/part machine – this doubt is allayed by the very intimacy of technology across our everyday lives. Our communications technologies have become smaller, more convergent, and more comprehensive. We use them to receive, gather, develop, and transmit information. They are proximate with so much of what we do and who we are, and yet, as Richard Lanham points out in *The Economics of Attention* (2006), the consequence is that we are swimming in a sea of data, the only constraint upon which is our limited capacity to take it all in.

If this is so, as much as we are changing, we are also beholden to age-old ways of doing things. The book that you hold in your hands, for instance, is an anachronistic technology that has shown remarkable resilience. Culturally speaking, the book is intimately connected to our identities as learners and participants in the story-telling circle that is central to the human condition. The book speaks to our interior lives. It is silent, yet evocative. It gives us access to the cultural legacies that bind us to the past and teases us with the promise of things to come. Compared with television, the book is often elegant and sophisticated, a repository of stories and information that has, until now, been associated with what the

nineteenth-century essayist and poet Matthew Arnold (1993 [1869]) described as 'the best that has been thought and said in the world.' Television, on the other hand, has only occasionally shaken its reputation as the black sheep in the communications media family.

Unlike the book, television is loud and brash; yet, it too can sometimes be smart and provocative. It changes culture, and like earlier forms of mass entertainment – magazines, film, recorded music, and radio – it mobilizes the eyes and the ears, weaving together a visual and audio tapestry that continues to bind together our lives. Among these earlier technologies, it was only film that combined both visual and audio elements (and even that took time to happen), so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that it was film that first attracted the attention of media educators. Where film helped kick off a movement, television soon became that movement's bread and butter. The combination of audiovisual narrative, commercialism, and the subtext of cultural arbiter made television a rich and important site for teaching and learning. Alongside film, teen magazines, popular music, and, to a lesser extent, radio, television was viewed as a significant site of socialization, acculturation, and learning that deserved to be treated as an educational resource in classrooms and other sites of learning.

This book takes for granted that television and other media forms have become part of the cultural fabric of our lives, and that these media deserve the full attention of educators and should be part of the curriculum in schools. In this regard, we do not stand alone. Media education is a movement that has been largely led at the grassroots by school-based educators and community activists, supported by a small cadre of scholars and media professionals. In this book, we acknowledge and trace the history of media education, and grapple with the fresh challenges posed by the convergent media of the twenty-first century. We develop two parallel models of media literacy that are described as Media Literacy 1.0 and Media Literacy 2.0. These models map out pedagogical responses to distinct media eras, but, because these eras continue to overlap and collide, these models are held together in a dynamic tension. Without the new communication technologies, there could not be a Media Literacy 2.0. But without the accumulated knowledge of critical educational practice drawn from several decades of Media Literacy 1.0, a Media Literacy 2.0 agenda is at risk of becoming shallow and instrumentalist, focused on teaching soon-to-be-redundant software packages to young people who have access to a wide range of media tools and capacities in their out-of-school lives.

In this book, we weave together issues and examples from both Media Literacy 1.0 and Media Literacy 2.0. In Chapter 1, for example, we discuss the history and emergence of media education. Chapter 2 focuses on who young people are today, with particular concern for the nature of their digitally mediated lives. Chapter 3 describes another side of the history of media literacy, the role of the media itself as a site of instruction and learning. Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 have been written as primers for Media Literacy 1.0, one focused on the interpretation of the media and the other on its production. In Chapter 4, we present a holistic model for media interpretation that unites the analysis of media institutions, media texts, the active involvement of audiences, and the give and take between the media and culture, including how one impacts upon and (sometimes) changes the other. In Chapter 5, we articulate four key areas of concern that speak to the way media production aligns with and helps to nurture young people's agency and engagement with the world. Chapter 6 addresses the areas of new and digital literacies, and in Chapter 7 we articulate our understanding of Media Literacy 2.0 by addressing seven key conceptual problematics – consciousness, communication, consumption and surveillance, convergence, creativity, copy-paste, and community – that are at the core of this project. In Chapter 8, we carry the discussion of media literacy forward by addressing a vexed concern – critical citizenship – that continues to be at the center of the field.

Throughout this book, the reader will find a number of sidebars written primarily by emerging researchers and media literacy educators. These sidebars function like hypertext. They draw the reader away from the narrative for an in-depth discussion of an issue or a media phenomenon. In many cases, the sidebars also offer ideas and resources for teaching media literacy in various settings.

As two academics with long histories of working in the field of media education, we view this book as a culmination of two decades of involvement in media literacy, and as a reflection of ideas drawn from a wide range of educators. Writing this text has been a collaborative effort and an equal co-authorship, but a final decision on author sequence ultimately had to be made, and we decided on alphabetical order. These are remarkable times to be working in media education, and we are indebted to the many youth and colleagues who have challenged us and pushed our thinking forward. We cannot thank them all here, but their presence in our lives is reflected throughout this book.

Contents

Preface ix

1 What is Media Literacy? 1
Media Literacy 2.000 4
Natives and Aliens 7
Media Education has a History to Draw On 9
Media Education in the Twenty-First Century 12

2 Children's Media Lives 17
Researching Young People in Mediated Environments 19
Getting Older Faster, Staying Younger Longer 20
Life Inside a Media Wonderland 23
Inequities and Parents' Worries about Media Use 25
Media Concentration and the Big Four 28
Creating Cradle-to-Grave Consumers 30
Conclusion 33

3 Media as Public Pedagogy 35
Media as Threat 37
Media as a Form of Public Pedagogy 39
New Learning Horizons 41
Debating Dangerous Screens 43
The Merits of Television for Education 46
Children's Learning Television 48
SIDEBAR: *An Inconvenient Truth* as public pedagogy 50
Public Service Announcements, Entertainment Education, and Culture Jamming 53
Bricolage 58
SIDEBAR: Pre-teen girls and popular music 60

4 Media Literacy 101 63
A Demand for New Heuristics 65
Cultural Life 67
Production 68
SIDEBAR: Moral makeovers: Reality television and the good citizen 69
Text 76
Audience 84
SIDEBAR: Children's media encounters in contemporary India: Leisure and learning 88
Cultural Life 92
SIDEBAR: *The Simpsons*: Not such a dumb show after all! 95

5 Media Production and Youth Agency 100
What Creative Work Adds to Media Education: Production as Praxis 101
SIDEBAR: Youth cultural production and creative economies 102
SIDEBAR: Assessing learning from practical media production at an introductory level: The role of writing 106
What does Production Mean? 110
How is Production a Form of Agency? 112
SIDEBAR: Youth as knowledge producers in community-based video in the age of AIDS 119
SIDEBAR: Youth Radio 126

6 Literacies: New and Digital 137
What does it Mean to be 'Literate' Today? 137
Expanded Literacies 139
New Literacies and New Ways of Thinking and Doing 141
Digital Literacies and 'Top-Down' Approaches 144
The Role of Learning Environments in Relation to Digital Literacies 146

7 Media Literacy 2.0: Contemporary Media Practices and Expanded Literacies 151
Media Literacy 2.0: The Seven Cs of Contemporary Youth Media Practices 153
SIDEBAR: Learning in *Second Life* 156
SIDEBAR: Immersive advertising and children's game spaces 164
SIDEBAR: Rethinking media literacy through video game play 175

SIDEBAR: Understanding remix and digital mashup 180
SIDEBAR: YAHAnet: Youth, the Arts, HIV and AIDS network 184
Conclusion 190

8 Critical Citizenship and Media Literacy Futures 191
Thinking, Judging, and Critical Citizenship 195
Last Words 200

References 203

Index 217

1

What is Media Literacy?

Media literacy is a set of competencies that enable us to interpret media texts and institutions, to make media of our own, and to recognize and engage with the social and political influence of media in everyday life. That is the shortest definition we can provide. The rest of this book is about expanding this definition and situating media literacy within evolving discussions of literacy, media, and technology education.

Media literacy suggests a capacity or competence to do something with media, whether to make sense of it, to produce it, or to understand its role in our societies. Just as more traditional literacy practices enable one to engage with print-based texts, media literacy enables one to engage with a variety of multimodal texts ('texts' that may include visual, audio, and print text elements) that range from a magazine advertisement to a televised rock video, a radio talk show to a video game, a cell phone photograph to a website. In reality, the range of possible multimodal texts that can be studied or produced through the critical lens of media literacy is vast. That said, it is important to note at the outset that media includes both media texts (i.e., a newspaper, a song, a film, or a website) produced by broadcasters, filmmakers, and Web designers, and media technologies (i.e., television, film, and digital technologies such as cell phones, iPods, and digital cameras) used to produce these texts.

We recognize that framing the meaning of media in this manner runs the risk of escalating the subject to the point where the center does not hold. But media literacy has long faced the problem of developing a mode of analysis or a way of thinking that speaks across the various technologies, texts, and institutions that make up contemporary media cultures. We are equally

Media Literacies: A Critical Introduction, First Edition. Michael Hoechsmann and Stuart R. Poyntz.

aware that we are writing from a privileged vantage point in the history of media, and of media education. Cresting the wave of some powerful new transformations in communication, we are in a position to see patterns that were not as clear even a decade ago, and to view a world powerfully transformed from the one of 20 years ago. In 1990, the personal computer was still a somewhat clunky machine owned mainly by technology buffs and educators. E-mail was primarily an inter-university messaging system and the World Wide Web was a modest, text-driven system. Meanwhile, television was at its apogee, enjoying its last moments as the culturally central communications medium it had become. Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985) and Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) were influential texts that suggested an era of immanent intellectual decline. Said Bloom (1987): 'Our students have lost the practice of and taste for reading' (p. 62). 'As long as they have the Walkman on,' he continued, 'they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say. And, after its prolonged use, when they take it off, they find they are deaf' (p. 81).

As if art should imitate life imitating art, *The Simpsons* had aired its first episode in December of 1989, and the dumbing down of America seemed in full flower in a revolution symbolized by Homer and Bart Simpson. (In a sidebar in Chapter 4 we demonstrate that *The Simpsons* is not dumb at all where media education is concerned.) The Walkman referenced by Bloom had been in circulation for just over ten years, and MTV, a station where commercials are content and all content is commercial, had been broadcasting for almost a decade. The world of media in 1990 was thus one of consumption by mass audiences, and the trends appeared to be moving towards greater individualization (Walkman), more base content (*The Simpsons*), and greater commercialization (MTV).

If this was true in America, the forces of globalization and the increasing movement of media texts and technologies around the world during this period meant that similar debates and circumstances were underway across the world's regions (Tufte and Enghel, 2009). Throughout this book, we mark some of these developments. Here we note, however, that the late 1980s and 1990s corresponded with a time of dramatic growth of media literacy organizations worldwide, the apogee of an era we will call 'Media Literacy 1.0.'

We use this designation because this period of history was a stage of growth in media education that focused primarily on the power and influence of broadcast media (i.e., the production of film and television

studios, record labels, and corporate advertising). Given the circumstances of the era, media education was mainly predicated on reacting to the monolith of the mass media, and the primary method used in media literacy was a critique of *representation* focused on what was being communicated (the 'texts'), by whom (the media 'industry'), and for whom (the 'audience'). We argue in Chapter 4 that there is still much that remains helpful about Media Literacy 1.0 – after all, most web trolling, music listening, television watching, and film going among children and youth is still intertwined with the world of corporate media. If this is true today, however, by 1990 there was already a robust media education sector emerging in many nations in response to the role of the mass media in kids' lives. The UNESCO Grunwald Declaration on Media Education of 1982 had to a great extent set the tone for these developments. Indeed, the UNESCO statement represented an important consensus among the 19 nations assembled at Grunwald, Germany.

> Rather than condemn or endorse the undoubted power of the media, we need to accept their significant impact and penetration throughout the world as an established fact, and also appreciate their importance as an element of culture in today's world [...] The school and the family share the responsibility of preparing the young person for living in a world of powerful images, words and sounds. Children and adults need to be literate in all three of these symbolic systems, and this will require some reassessment of educational priorities. Such a reassessment might well result in an integrated approach to the teaching of language and communication. [Nonetheless,] media education will be most effective when parents, teachers, media personnel and decision-makers all acknowledge they have a role to play in developing greater critical awareness among listeners, viewers and readers.

Shortly after the Grunwald Declaration a new model for articulating a media literacy curriculum emerged from the influential work of Len Masterman. Masterman's seminal text, *Teaching the Media* (1985), would in fact form the basis of much Media Literacy 1.0 work. At root, Masterman argued that students need to engage with issues of media production, language, representation, and audiences to address how meaning operates in the broadcast media. The formula drawn from Masterman and elaborated by media educators across a variety of contexts enabled a rich, critical, and savvy analysis of media institutions, texts, and media reception contexts. This method, still a key component of media education

today, responded to the cultural and social conditions of the day, an era of massified and one-way media flow.

Media Literacy 2.000

By 2000, however, the world of communications media was in a period of rapid evolution. The previous decade had seen the entry of a variety of new technologies and applications into the marketplace and a thoroughgoing transformation of others that had still been in primitive forms a decade before. The synthetic World Wide Web of Tim Berners-Lee had made its debut in the early 1990s and had been the biggest transformation in communications media of that decade, enabling the mass adaptation of other Internet applications such as e-mail, instant messaging, and chat, as well as providing an electronic portal to a virtual Library of Alexandria of knowledge, data, information, and nonsense. The staggering growth of the role of the Internet in everyday life and commerce was such that world governments had spent months of preparation for the turning of the clock in 2000, fearing a Millennium bug that was supposed to cause mass chaos. While this turned out to be one of the greatest unauthored hoaxes in communications history, another perfect storm brewing in media education circles in 2000 came from a different technology that had made great advances in the previous decade.

Video games were not new in 2000, but their complexity and popularity seemed to reach new heights. Complicating this, in the previous year, two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado had come to school with guns and bombs and proceeded to kill as many students as they could. When the rampage was over, 15 people were dead, including a teacher and the two shooters. In seeking answers to this senseless tragedy, pundits and theorists had identified the shooters' interest in violent video games as a potential cause of the incident. We track the debates on media violence and the specific place of video games in these debates in Chapter 3; suffice it to say, however, this interactive media technology came in to media education debates under a hail of suspicion. In truth, for the most part, media literacy did not have a place for video gaming, predicated as it was on the much more active participation of game users. Media education had been, and still was, a discourse well situated to respond to broadcast screen media. Here, the important questions seemed to be: what's on the screen, who makes it, and how does the viewer respond to it? Similar orientations

were taken to the pages of magazines and newspapers, and, to a much lesser extent, the audio messaging of radio. But, as discussed at various points throughout this book, different and, in some instances, more complex questions need to be asked of video games. In the early 2000s, however, media education was still predicated primarily on a viewer whose hands were not engaged in making or playing media. It was a discourse that responded primarily to the practices of the eye and the ear.

In the subsequent decade, hands-on interaction and participation in media consumption and production has increasingly become the norm rather than the exception. Henry Jenkins (2006a) describes these practices as part of a culture of convergence. Such a culture is one where there are more opportunities for young people (and others) to express themselves through digital media, 'to transform personal reaction[s]' to the images, sounds, and narratives of consumer media culture into forms of 'social interaction' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 41). In a sense, the contemporary period has involved the most ruptural and transformative shifts in media and communications since the late nineteenth century. This is a period of profound change in how we organize and produce knowledge, and in how we communicate. The most significant element of this change is *participation*, along with two-way media flow. The era of one-way information flow from publishers and broadcasters that Tom Pettit (2007) calls the 'Gutenberg Parenthesis' is over. Of course, we are still in a nascent period, but there have been unmistakable shifts in social and cultural life. The dynamic relationship between Media Literacy 1.0 and Media Literacy 2.0 we argue for in this book is meant to address these shifts. At root, we suggest that the core of media literacy today is the work of empowering young people through meaningful and critical participation in contemporary media environments. We note, as do Jenkins et al. (2006), however, that interactive technologies – including computers, the Internet, and digital cameras – do not guarantee such participation. Rather, the latter must be nurtured, and this is where media educators must play a profound role.

The notion that young people can be empowered through and about media as a means for reshaping public spheres emerged as part of certain media education initiatives as early as the 1960s (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion on this, especially in relation to the development of community-based youth media production initiatives). Nonetheless, until the 2000s, the idea of media education as empowerment had largely been a marginal position, argued most forcefully by educators and scholars such as David Buckingham (1996, 2003a) and Jesus Martin-Barbero (1987). Until

the new communication technology r/evolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s, empowerment models of media education offered students a perspective on media use and appropriation that focused on how viewers and consumers of media were not simply brainwashed, but rather participated in far more complex interpretations and mediations with the media in their lives. Unfortunately, this was always a relatively advanced perspective in media education circles, the more subtle perspective of educators who had read and understood some cultural studies and who were skeptical of approaches that only saw the potential negative impacts of media on young people. Most media education in practice continued to be a form of simple response to the idea that the mainstream media largely perpetuates dominant power relationships and ideas (i.e., hegemony), however, and so David Buckingham was still forcefully making the case in 2003 for an empowerment model in his influential *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture.* For our purposes, the lessons to be learned from this transitional period are that while a critical media education should always include the analysis of the highly ideological and commercial transmissions of the mainstream media, this perspective is never sufficient to explain the complex mediations made by the people involved in production, reception, and meaning-making with media.

To catalogue the changes in communication technology and media use in the first decade of the twenty-first century is not really the purpose of this chapter. Nonetheless, especially in the domains of Web 2.0, where users are simultaneously producers and consumers of media content, the active involvement of young people in media-making today has dramatically shifted. Extraordinary advances in video gaming and simulative worlds such as *Second Life* have pushed us much further towards a new model of immersive media (see Chapter 2 for more on this) where the user is both at the controls and on the screen. While there continue to be significant digital divides that shape how media environments operate, it is worth noting that, for those with even limited access to the Internet, low-cost, user-friendly software (i.e., audio, video, and music production applications, as well as Web 2.0 distribution platforms) has enabled some forms of cultural expression that were unimaginable only a few years ago.

As a result of these and like developments, media consumption and use have shifted dramatically over the past decade. While television and radio still play dominant roles in media consumption, many people, including children and youth, are now consuming media across platforms, often simultaneously. We document young people's changing media lives

extensively in Chapter 2. Here we note, however, that television has taken cues from the Internet, and viewers today are more likely to actively participate in television content, as the wildly popular world of reality television – and its associated web forums – aptly demonstrates. Moreover, with the convergence of the camera, music player, and telephone in pocket-sized cell phones, technologies for media consumption and production have shrunk to the point that many wired young people are now walking broadcasters, able to post images and video to the World Wide Web in real time, all the while listening to their favorite pop music and answering phone calls or texts from friends. In other words, while the technologies of media use change, so too do the perspectives and practices of the users, so much so that debates have emerged that question whether young people's most basic orientation to learning can fit with traditional schooling models.

Natives and Aliens

At the center of discussions about adolescents' learning in relation to contemporary media cultures are ideas about digital natives who are like 'aliens in the classroom.' In an article with that very same title, Bill Green and Chris Bigum (1993) raised the question as to whether educators need to adapt to new types of students whose coming of age has corresponded with the birth of a digital culture. In response, Green and Bigum proposed that teachers should adapt to young people, who are in some ways fundamentally different from previous generations. The questions raised by Green and Bigum are intended as interventions to challenge the traditional skill-and-drill and sage-on-the-stage models of education at a time when students' out-of-school experiences in and with new technologies are setting up a profoundly different engagement with learning. What Green and Bigum tentatively raised as questions, however, hardened in Mark Prensky's (2001) formulation about the differences between Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants. In fact, in Prensky's casting it often seems like students can learn nothing in contemporary classrooms:

> *Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach* [...] A really big *discontinuity* has taken place. One might even call it a 'singularity' – an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no going back. This so-called 'singularity' is the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century