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Voices from the Field Federal Agency Efforts to Advance Media Literacy in Substance Abuse Prevention

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Abstract

This article describes and reflects upon efforts to generate greater support for media literacy and critical thinking within the strategies and programs of the Federal government in the early 1990s to about 2005 primarily among agencies with an interest in youth substance abuse prevention. Beginning with their personal reflections on discovering media literacy, the authors describe the wide range of initiatives that occurred under their leadership in bringing media literacy into the 1996 National Drug Control Strategy. Additionally, some of the inherent challenges and obstacles that impacted the ability to expand these efforts are described. The authors each served as Associate Director of the White House Drug Policy Office and Director of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign.

Keywords: *substance abuse prevention, media literacy, alcohol and tobacco, social marketing, White House Office of National Drug Control Policy*

Alan Levitt first learned about media literacy when his daughter started to bring critical questions about media home to the family living room. He recalls it this way: “In 1991, my wife and I were watching an episode of a TV series when our daughter, then 14, came into the room, looked at the scene on the screen, and asked ‘Why are all the men sitting at the table and the women sitting or standing behind them? What does that say about their power structure?’ At that time, my daughter was attending Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring Maryland. She was enrolled in the Communication Arts Program there and one of her classes focused on media literacy (ML) and critical viewing.” As Levitt recalled, her insightful question led to his discovery and profound appreciation of the field. Working with other government colleagues who were familiar with and advocates for media literacy, Levitt was effective in introducing the concept into the National Drug Control Strategy of the United States. Several other federal agencies also gained awareness of media literacy because of that strategy and the efforts to promote ML as a component of substance abuse prevention.

Not long after that conversation, Levitt began to work at the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP), part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and immersed himself in the media literacy field via conferences and discovering ML units and publications that had been created. He also listened to one of his daughter’s teachers – Christopher Lloyd, then at Montgomery Blair High School—and talked with Bob Denniston, who then headed CSAP’s communications division, and was already supportive of ML as part of a strategy to educate and enable youth to become more critical thinkers concerning media messages relating to alcohol and drugs.

Bob Denniston’s experience with media literacy had a different origin. At the U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP), policy makers were fortunate to have a clear mandate and Administration support for reaching youth about the risks of alcohol and drug use. Denniston was keenly familiar with and concerned about the powerful influence that pop culture and advertising had on youth and their attitudes toward various public health issues, particularly alcohol. With the saturation of pro-use messages in the media and social environment,

they knew the task would be difficult, given the limited means to combat the messages in the entertainment

media and alcohol industry-supported advertising that reached, informed, and influenced youth.

Although they identified strategies such as public media campaigns, "earned media" (public relations), counter advertising and media advocacy, these strategies were limited for several key reasons.

First, no federal agency had the resources to out-shout commercial interests who were spending billions on alcohol and tobacco commercials; second, messages coming from a federal agency might be suspect, especially when they attempted to influence social norms; and third, refuting harmful myths and misperceptions required careful (and expensive) message testing to avoid unwittingly reinforcing such myths or creating boomerang effects. Denniston great potential in media literacy because it could mitigate against pro-use messages by encouraging youth to become more critical consumers of media, and to ask tough questions about the source and purpose of the messages beamed to them.

During the 1990s and beyond, more youth were beginning to create their own media content because of the widespread availability and increased capabilities of technology and media tools such as video, cell phones, emergence of social media, and the rapidly-dropping costs for Internet access. Indeed, media production became a key element of media literacy practice due in no small part to increased access to the means of production. In some areas, teens produced critical reviews of media, using news, entertainment, and advertising content in their stories to call attention to the persuasive intent. In others, youth developed parodies of ads and other media content to poke fun at message sources and shine a light on efforts to influence their behaviors.

Thus, in theory at least, increased critical thinking plus ability to rebut and refute pro-use messages could serve as a powerful force. Unlike media campaigns that typically focus on only a single substance such as tobacco, drugs or alcohol and are necessarily time limited, media literacy further helps to strengthen youth abilities to detect persuasive and pervasive messages of all types, to include sexual behaviors, junk food, violence, or other problems that youth face during their most vulnerable years.

Partnerships Create Momentum

Although CSAP had limited resources, it was able to partner with several organizations with common interests in enabling youth to make healthy decisions. In

the early 1990s, Denniston learned of the work of Renee Hobbs, Frank Baker, Kathleen Tyner, David Considine, Liz Thoman, Robert Kubey, and others, as well as tobacco prevention leaders who believed that critical thinking could help to counter the ubiquitous ads and other social cues that influence youth norms and perceptions of reality. Denniston, and one of his staff, Nancy Chase, advanced ML in meetings with CSAP's national stakeholders and in other communication efforts. Along with Liz Thoman, Renee Hobbs, and Lisa Reisberg of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Nancy Chase was one of the four partners who founded the Partnership for Media Education (PME), the group that later became the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA), which is now the national membership organization that supports this journal, the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE). In addition to supporting some National Media Education conferences during the 1990s, Denniston included some aspects of ML within guidelines for grants being solicited to community prevention organizations. Other efforts included:

Weekly Reader. CSAP supported an entire national issue for elementary school youth that was devoted to introducing media literacy concepts and skills as a part of a substance abuse prevention strategy. Included were activities, quizzes, resources, and a teacher's guide, "Media Literacy Skills as a Substance Abuse Prevention Strategy."

Media Literacy Video Competition. CSAP created a contest for metro Washington, D.C. middle and high school student teams that produced their own videos in two categories: 30 sec PSAs and up to 2 ½ minute shorts. Community, educational, and public health organizations and agencies joined CSAP to develop the contest and provide lessons and background about ML. Each category had several thousand dollars in prizes for the schools of the winning teams. A prominent local TV news anchor presented the awards. Winning entries (18 schools participated) were shown on local TV.

For Levitt, even though his education and entire career had focused on communications, the more he learned about ML, the more meetings and conferences he attended, the stronger he felt that ML should be an integral component of basic youth education, especially in national substance abuse prevention programs. According to Levitt, "Visiting the Center for Media Literacy in Los Angeles was like being a kid in a candy store because of the shelves holding a vast array of materials that had been created for various issues."

For decades, most prevention efforts focused on "protecting" or "informing" youth about the dangers of

tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs, typically via direct messaging or through schools, parents, and other youth influencers. Other efforts focused on limiting the pro or normative messaging teens and tweens were exposed to from the multiple sources of media and messages in their environment. So, ML was a new, additional strategy of substance abuse prevention, helping youth develop the capacity to see through inaccurate and manipulative messages, false norms, and resist peer pressure.

During the 1990s, there also was significant media violence, particularly in media consumed by youth. It was the beginning of the V-chip era. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), several cable TV associations, and ML organizations were involved in their own efforts to minimize negative impacts on youth. Excellent materials were produced to introduce the topic in schools and at home, and at times we partnered with them. Several AAP chapters even implemented “well child” visits, which included a *media history checklist* when parents brought their children in for an annual checkup. ML was mentioned in the communications, websites, programs, and activities of some affiliates of these groups.

One of Levitt’s favorite ML efforts is a public service ad that was produced to promote media literacy by the National Cable Television Association, National PTA, and Cable in the Classroom, which had worked with Liz Thoman and Renee Hobbs to produce the “Take Charge of Your TV” effort. Associated with this effort, a public service ad was produced. It was for an imaginary product called “Blue Buck Beer.” The opening scene is a hip party in someone’s home - people are dancing, sitting or standing and talking - many holding a bottle of “Blue Buck Beer.” Then a knock at the door and as someone opens it we see two young tweens outside, showing their ID. “Baloney Busters, here,” says one, “We’re out to find bogus TV and stamp it out.” As they step inside to the party, the camera draws back and viewers see that the party is not really in someone’s home, but on a sound stage made to look like a home. The tweens walk over to a dancing couple and, holding a microphone, ask, “Do you two actually know each other?” They say “No.” Then over to two others holding bottles of the beer - “Do you actually drink this stuff?” The actors shake their heads “no.” They then go up to the guy sitting in the Director’s chair, camera at his side. Holding up a “Violation Notice,” they say “You’re busted... for fabricating a lifestyle that doesn’t exist.” “Learn to watch with a critical eye,” says the narrator. Information appears on screen, where viewers can get lots of information and resources. The 30-second public service announcement (which was produced but may never have been formally released) very effectively

demonstrated the usefulness of media literacy for youth in the context of substance abuse prevention.

White House Meeting on Media Literacy and Prevention Accelerates Innovation

Media literacy became part of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy during the mid-1990s, thanks to Fred Garcia, then ONDCP’s Deputy Director for Demand Reduction, who became familiar with ML and was receptive to it. Probably no one ultimately had a greater impact in advancing media literacy at the Federal level than Garcia, who was a Presidential appointee. He supported the idea that ML should be a part of the 1996 National Drug Control Strategy. Levitt worked at the White House Drug Policy Office (ONDCP) from 1995 - 2003, first serving as Chief of the Education Branch and later leading the planning and direction of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign (NYADMC). Garcia opened the door for a major surge in ML advocacy at the federal level. After Garcia’s departure from ONDCP, there was still substantial receptivity by the Drug Czar to retaining the concept and even significantly advancing ONDCP’s support for it. Resources became available to fund a number of small-scale projects and activities to promote ML with a multitude of other community, educational, public health organizations as well as federal agencies.

The Drug Czar was impressed enough to authorize convening of a two-day meeting of 16 media literacy experts and the same number of key prevention officials from 10 federal agencies (within the Dept.’s of Justice, Health and Human Services, Education, and ONDCP). ML leaders included Renee Hobbs, Kathleen Tyner, Elizabeth Thoman, Linda Bergsma, David Considine, Chris Lloyd, and several others. The presentations and discussions did much to instill interest and follow on interactions among and within federal agencies that were concerned about a spectrum of youth public health issues.

As noted above, the most impactful action taken by ONDCP to advance the importance of ML was to incorporate it in the prevention section of the National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS) in 1996, 1997 and 1998. Table 1 shows an excerpt from this policy. This was perhaps the first time any federal agency had embraced ML as part of its national policy strategy. The President’s National Drug Control Strategy helps shape the prevention programs of 14 federal agencies in eight Cabinet-level Departments, and also identifies specific responsibilities for some to carry out.

Table 1
**1998 U.S. National Drug Control Strategy (NDCS)
 Promoting Media Literacy/Critical Viewing Skills**

Media literacy teaches critical thinking so that individuals can discern the substance and intention of messages relating to drugs, tobacco, and alcohol. Media-literate youth understand the manipulative component of such material and are more likely to reject it. Last year, National Institute on Drug Abuse, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Office of Juvenile Justice Programs of the Department of Justice incorporated media literacy in their drug-prevention programs. In 1998, HHS and ONDCP will support an American Academy of Pediatrics “Media Matters” campaign to provide media literacy training for parents and physicians. ONDCP and HHS will also sponsor a media education conference in 1998 (p. 33).

Source: White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, National Drug Control Strategy: A 10-Year Plan, 1998 – 2007. Available: https://www.ncjrs.gov/ondcppubs/pdf/strat_pt1.pdf

Both President Clinton and the First Lady made strong statements about the value of media literacy and critical thinking and the importance for youth to know and understand these skills. Under the aegis of the ONDCP, a wide variety of activities became part of the strategy for addressing substance abuse prevention, including the following programs and efforts:

Content analyses of media messages reaching youth. In 2000, ONDCP contracted with Don Roberts at Stanford University and Peter Christenson at Lewis and Clark College to conduct a three-year series of four content analyses of how drugs, alcohol, and tobacco were depicted in the hundreds of motion pictures, television programs, music videos, and music lyrics that either specifically targeted youth, or were popular among youth. The research included various types of media, five genres of music, and the context of substance use when depicted (associated with power, money, sex, humor, violence, age of user, character role, ethnicity, sex, violence, consequences, frequency, etc.). Analyses revealed some large disparities between media depictions and reality (e.g. in 52% of popular movies seen by teens, when drug use was depicted, there were no negative consequences). ONDCP widely circulated the results and used them in briefings with media, writers in Hollywood, and a multitude of organizations and associations serving youth (Roberts & Christenson, 2000).

Spiderman was enlisted with the help of Marvel Comics to create a four-part series of eight-page “media literate adventures” that were inserted in four sequential issues of *Boys Life*, *Girls Life*, *Scholastic Magazine*, and other publications which reached more than 200,000 classrooms of middle school aged youth. Entitled *Fastlane*, the initiative was launched at the National

Press Club, the project, included bulletin board sized posters featuring Spiderman (“Are you getting the real message?”), teachers’ guides, and other materials. An oral history of the creation of the comic, with images of the comic’s design style, was published recently by the Comic Alliance (Sims, 2014).

Federal Interagency Workgroup on Drug and Violence Deglamorization and Media Literacy. In 1998, ONDCP worked with the President’s Domestic Policy Council to establish this interagency group, which helped to advance a number of ML issues by fostering discussion and encouraging collaboration and partnerships, as well as the sharing of information across the government. One result of this interagency working group was a project, developed by the U.S. Office on Women’s Health, to introduce girls ages 9 – 14 to media literacy through an online interactive game called *My Pop Studio* (Hobbs & Rowe, 2008).

New York Times Newspaper in Education (NIE) Program. Entitled, *Media Literacy and Drug Prevention*, this program was offered at no charge to middle and high school educators in 22 states during the 2000-2002 school years. The 62-page, 10-lesson teacher’s guide also listed relevant websites and other resources for ML. Classes that used the guide also received copies of the newspaper at no charge to use as part of the lessons. More than 11,000 additional guides were distributed to teachers by ONDCP. The guide was also posted on the *New York Times* NIE website which was accessed by thousands of others. The lessons use *The New York Times* newspaper as the vehicle for initially teaching media literacy concepts and then applying it to other forms of media, such as television, movies, the Internet, etc. Students were encouraged to feel confident about speaking up when discussing drug

use and prevention. The program was created with sponsorship from ONDCP and did not involve the reporting or editing staff of the New York Times (New York Times, 2001).

Faith Nights. Congregations throughout the country held faith nights for middle school students, especially multicultural youth. Because a number of religious organizations also expressed concern about the deluge of negative messages reaching children, ONDCP developed a package of materials on ML with lessons, resources, and various activities appropriate for these sessions. The sessions received extensive news coverage in national and local media, as well as in religious conferences and publications. An evaluation report on faith-based substance abuse prevention training reveals the continuing application of media literacy as a component of a Southern California based initiative (Evalcorp, 2012).

White House Media Literacy Summit. In 2001, at the White House Conference Center, ONDCP brought together ML experts, professors, educators and representatives from the American Academy of Pediatrics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, SAMHSA and other agencies and organizations for two days to explore approaches, objectives, best practices, needed research, and implementation, along with insights into how to infuse the issue in various topics. The conversation resulted in a report, entitled, “Helping Youth Navigate the Media Age” which was presented at the 2001 National Association for Media Literacy Education conference and promoted through media and websites of other organizations. The program identified key ideas about maximizing the effectiveness of media literacy including advice like “acknowledge the pleasure in media use,” “use hands-on media production” and “don’t bash the media.” Challenges were identified including the boomerang effect, where talking about media’s representation of drug use with children and young people elevates the visibility and salience of these messages. The discussion explored three “promising practices” including parent-focused, faith-based and programs that emphasize the critical evaluation of Internet websites about drugs (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2001).

The leaders of more than 45 national civic, fraternal, service and community service organizations (Elks, Kiwanis, Boys and Girls Clubs, etc.) also participated in another Media Literacy Summit in 2001. Many of these groups mentioned the importance of media literacy in internal communications to their members and provided ML resources on their own websites. A ML tool kit for local substance abuse prevention organizations was developed for local and

community organizations to encourage understanding and promotion of this concept in their own activities such as meetings, conferences, youth events and programs, and other communications.

Many of the above efforts, along with partnerships with other youth serving organizations such as Girl Scouts, benefitted from the support of leading ML experts, several of whom were also enlisted to speak at meetings, develop more tailored materials, provide guidance and insight, and identify relevant existing ML materials. Overall, this provided a network and gateway to a diverse range of higher-level government policy makers, advocates, educators, community prevention and service organizations. The experts provided resources, strategies, and connections that these individuals could take back to their home agencies and organizations and their affiliates. This generated substantial support for and awareness of media literacy and practice across a diverse range of programs, meetings, funding, issues, and other activities. In particular, this initiative helped to support a variety of media literacy programs that included measures of program effectiveness, which were reviewed in a systematic meta-analysis by Bergsma and Carney (2007).

ML Minutes. Because ONDCP’s massive National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign included unprecedented funding (more than \$1 billion) and substantial contacts with the entertainment industry, the campaign had many interactions with various media professional guilds and entertainment organizations. Levitt and Denniston wanted to capitalize on those relationships and develop a series of ‘media literacy minutes’ to help educate viewers about how the actual production of images affects them. They wanted to explore how music, costumes, acting, dialogue, camera angles, special effects, background, prop placement, etc., as well as the content and plot affect viewer impressions. They discussed this idea with Renee Hobbs and saw it as a novel way to show how messages are constructed. A partnership with organizations that work in the entertainment field was explored. Levitt and Denniston believed that creating “Media Literacy Minute” ads would also be a way to incorporate media literacy in the Campaign to a much greater degree, yet also comply with the Congressional mandate that 90% of expenditures be spent on advertising. The potential was enormous and exciting as a way to introduce media literacy to mass audiences. Imagine for a moment ML minutes during the Super Bowl or amid the Saturday morning cartoons. But it was not to be. Because, at that time, no strong, specific, and convincing research was available on the nexus between media literate youth and

a decreased likelihood of use of illicit drugs, the potential expenditure of what would be many millions of taxpayer dollars could not be justified.

Above The Influence

A variety of youth social marketing approaches to substance abuse prevention during the early 2000s were informed by sensitivity to the key concepts of media literacy education. Denniston, who came to work at ONDCP in 2000, became Associate Director of the Office and head of the media campaign when Levitt left that position in the fall of 2003. Under Denniston's leadership, the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign developed a new brand for the campaign entitled, "Above the Influence." That brand was created to challenge youth to be aware of and refute negative influences in their lives -- from peers, poor adult role models, and the media environment, which often glamorizes drug use and trivializes its consequences.

The campaign also had the effect of engaging youth beyond the illegal drug focus, calling attention to resistance strategies and identifying ways to remain positive, with message postings to the campaign website, other popular sites among youth, and local media. Some youth extended the focus beyond illegal drugs to address alcohol, tobacco, sexual behaviors and other youth issues. Across the country, local anti-drug and youth development organizations adopted the campaign to promote and encourage youth to stay above the negative influences in their lives and research evidence showed evidence of the campaign's impact in lowering the uptake of marijuana by 14- and 15-year olds (Slater et al, 2011).

Challenges in Federal Efforts to Further Advance Media Literacy

Although some states and school systems have implemented ML as a mandatory subject, and some professional and non-governmental organizations have embraced the concept and engaged in efforts to advance ML among youth and adults, there are a variety of obstacles that have limited a much stronger federal promotion of media literacy. Our siloed federal bureaucracy often means agencies or programs addressing particular youth problems (alcohol, drug and tobacco use; juvenile justice; racial stereotypes, obesity; sexual behavior, etc.) that would benefit from strong and sustained critical thinking and ML education may actually be *less* likely to partner because of an array of factors in our government culture. Congressional funding for any of these issues can be categorical and

fleeting. Collaboration with seemingly unrelated youth issues which could benefit by ML and critical viewing skills (e.g. obesity and drug prevention) *necessarily means giving up some control* and reduces the amount of information and funding allocated for each specific issue. Political needs can interfere, since agencies want to quickly bring more attention to an issue and show the impact of an appropriation, and this often outweighs what might be more comprehensive and impactful solutions that take more time to develop and demonstrate. And sometimes there are specific legislative barriers. At ONDCP, legislation that authorized the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign prohibited the Campaign from including tobacco issues and also greatly restricted what it could do in the area of youth alcohol use, despite the fact that the resiliency created by a collaborative media literacy/critical thinking approach with underage drinking opponents would have benefited and transcended those and other issues, and might also demonstrate that the messages reaching youth benefit the message sources.

Further, the cost to create quality ML materials and document the effectiveness of efforts can be significant. Evaluation is often a painstaking and expensive process. At ONDCP, the agency was not staffed or authorized to conduct an evaluation of ML activities. A very expensive and sophisticated evaluation was overseen by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), which was designed to assess the outcomes attributable to ONDCP's large-scale campaign, NOT individual program elements within it. In some cases, however, ONDCP did monitor process data -- such as the number of schools participating in the New York Times Newspapers in Education curriculum and tracked federal agency responsiveness to the ML guidance in the National Drug Control Strategy.

But there may be other obstacles not as apparent that relate to the need to provide strong and convincing research demonstrating the value of media literacy. While ONDCP did have some latitude to promote media literacy, the real barrier to a far more extensive, sustained effort was the lack of strong evidence that teaching it will help youth make healthier decisions. The federal government supports substance abuse prevention activities through research, grants, and programs (over 40 programs in 14 federal agencies within eight departments). Programs are tracked, not only internally but also by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), relevant Congressional Committees, and myriad professional, special interest, civic, corporate, and other organizations, as well as local communities that have a stake in those programs. In recent years, as evaluation

methods improved, there has also been a gradual increase in pressure to show evidence of effectiveness. After the Department of Education began posting tougher criteria for funding (which essentially terminated a longstanding program in the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools), its action was then echoed by other agencies funding their own programs. Today, some agencies provide lists of “approved” programs that have passed through rigorous, science-based review systems. The increasing burden to demonstrate effectiveness that such programs are a good use of public funds typically involves carefully documented evaluations and often very costly, multi-year studies with highly specific questions and markers.

Still even a minor change to a program or modifying or adding a new question to a survey for the purpose of demonstrating the efficacy of a program or strategy (e.g., media literacy) can sometimes create seismic debates among and between the stakeholders because of myriad vested interests involved, including educators and government, but also publishers, institutions that conduct the surveys, marketers, and other special interests that have a stake in the status quo.

Despite this, some ML programs have passed this test. Both SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices and the Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Program's Model Programs Guide include two ML programs. *Media Detective*, designed for children in the 3rd-5th grades, is a media literacy education program whose goal is to prevent or delay the onset of underage alcohol and tobacco use by enhancing the critical thinking skills of students so they become adept in deconstructing media messages, particularly those related to alcohol and tobacco products. Created by Janis Kupermidt and Tracy Scull, the program encourages healthy beliefs and attitudes about abstaining from alcohol and tobacco use. The program consists of 10 45-minute lessons based on established models of decision-making and research on the message interpretation process. Students are taught to deconstruct product advertisements by looking for five “clues”: (1) the product, (2) the target audience, (3) the ad hook, (4) the hidden message, and (5) missing information about the health-related consequences of using the product. The program uses a range of pedagogical techniques and can be adapted to a variety of classroom settings and skill levels of students (NREPP, 2010). Also created by Tracy Scull and Janis Kupermidt, *Media Ready* is a media literacy education program for 6th- to 8th-grade students. The curriculum is adaptable to a variety of classroom settings and skill levels of students, which also includes a 1-day training workshop, which provides

an introduction to the theory and research underlying the program model and instructions for facilitating each program activity. Those who successfully complete an online test at the end of this training receive certification of completion. These have been categorized as “promising” for alcohol and tobacco prevention and for social functioning. Outside of the substance abuse area, other ML programs developed at NIH are available and have been evaluated, in particular *Media-Smart Youth* from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), focusing on critical thinking about media that influence nutrition and physical activity choices, which involves skill-building and creating media products to educate their peers. Designed for youth ages 11-13, the program includes engagement in response to the six key media questions, and has been evaluated (National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, 2013).

To be sure there are other non-governmental stakeholders and special interests that have enormous, sometimes subtle, influence. They may not want prospective consumers to be critical thinkers when it comes to scrutinizing their products, advertising, lobbying, political statements, news coverage, advertising and other marketing effort -- or weighing in on the ferociously competitive 24/7 news and talk cycles. Their voices are also heard by the ultimate decision-makers on such issues (e.g. certain members of Congress). Similarly, in our federal bureaucracy, the head public affairs officer in each agency is generally a political appointee, and their allegiance is always to the current Administration. If media literacy programs, and activities must pass through such individuals during an approval process, other issues might arise.

Despite these barriers, ONDCP and CSAP were able to move the practice of media literacy forward in the context of substance abuse prevention. Today, ML activities are occasionally mentioned and funded in new grant solicitations from prevention agencies within the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, Justice, and ONDCP. The vast majority of this has been outside the school systems, often involving non-profit professional and national organizations (and their local affiliates) working to support youth development. This was part of the design by ONDCP and CSAP to promote the principles of ML to youth-serving organizations and agencies. In turn, those entities could create their own ML projects to address their local issues, rather than depend on federally developed materials.

The federal government's power to convene made it feasible to work with the key leaders in many fields to reach many local program leaders about the influence of media on youth, and the ways to engage and

enroll youth to become critical thinkers and message producers. In turn, groups concerned about the heavy media consumption by youth were able to take advantage of the pervasiveness of social media technology and declining costs to engage youth in something they had great interest in - helping promote healthy behaviors.

At ONDCP and CSAP, during the mid 1990s to 2005, there was a kind of perfect storm of opportunities that helped support and advance media literacy. There was bipartisan Congressional concern about the negative

media and cultural messages reaching youth; ample

resources; an openness within Administrations that supported media literacy; and some staff who were strong believers in the field and who had the latitude to discuss and make proposals, and convene potential influencers and adopters. These efforts may not have caused a seismic shift in the media literacy practices within U.S. schools, but they created opportunities to connect advocates with affinity groups that advanced the field in significant ways that continue to this day.

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Note: The authors have written this from their own experience and perspective and their views do not necessarily represent any government agency. Both Levitt and Denniston have retired from the Federal government.