
Media Literacy: What, Why, and How?

—*Donna J. Grace*

Literacy has traditionally been associated with the printed word. But today, print literacy is not enough. Children and youth need to learn to ‘read’ and interpret visual images as well. Film, television, videos, DVDs, computer games, and the Internet all hold a prominent and pervasive place in our culture. We have all heard the oft-quoted statistic that by the time children are eighteen they will have spent more time watching television than attending school. The media is not going to go away. Its presence in our lives is only going to increase. For this reason, the acquisition of media literacy skills is a necessity for today’s children and youth. They need to know not only how to use new technology, but also how to critically assess its influence and impact. This is what media literacy is about—the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce information for specific outcomes.

Media education in the U. S. lags far behind that of Canada, Australia, and Great Britain. This may be due to the fact that we have taken a largely protectionist stance regarding children and the media. The media is bad. Therefore we need to protect children from its influence. The political left and right are in rare agreement on the topic of the detrimental effects of media on children. They only differ on what is at fault: the right blames the media for undermining the morals and values of society, and the left blames the media for perpetuating them (i.e., capitalist consumerism, gender stereotyping, militarism).

Television is the medium that is the primary object of criticism. It is the “plug-in drug” that is accused of seducing youth away from reality, and contributing to delinquency, amorality, acts of aggression, declining literacy skills, obesity, and a desensitization to crime and violence. However, several decades of research and debate on the effects of television have proven inconclusive. Numerous studies have suggested a link between television and movie violence and increased aggression in viewers. But these have been correlation studies that are not designed to prove that viewing violence causes aggressive behavior. It may be that viewers who are already predisposed to aggression choose to view more media violence than others.

Research on media effects has produced inconsistent results. Many of the studies have focused on direct effects through controlled laboratory experiments. One of the most

common research designs in this mode involves subjects who are randomly selected to view either a violent or a non-violent movie clip. They are then placed in a situation where they have the opportunity to demonstrate aggression. In one kind of experiment, subjects are prompted to deliver electric shocks or loud noises, with a range of intensities, to someone else. Although these “victims” do not actually receive shocks or noises, the subjects do not know this. Similar research has been conducted with children. Subjects are first required to view a violent or non-violent film clip, then they are placed in a play setting and observed for aggressive behaviors. In these experiments, viewers who watched the violent movie clips have often exhibited higher levels of short-term aggression. Nevertheless, the findings are open to interpretation. Some media researchers (Buckingham, 1993) argue that these studies merely measure artificial responses to artificial stimuli in artificial situations. What an individual does in a contrived experimental situation like this may have very little to do with how that person lives and acts in the real world. Carmen Luke (1990) adds that these investigations represent an attempt to reduce complex social phenomena to simple explanations. Paik and Comstock (Bushman & Anderson, 1998, p. 40) found that violent media have had larger effects on aggression in laboratory studies than in field settings. Bushman and Anderson (1998) conclude that these discrepancies between real world and laboratory studies indicate a need for more conceptual work to be done.

Many earlier studies on media violence also neglected to consider the context of viewing and the extent to which children perceived the content as real. It was thought, for instance, that children perceived violence in cartoons in the same way as violence in news footage, war movies, or westerns. We now know that as young children mature, they can tell the difference between fact and fiction. The work of Hodge & Tripp (1986) demonstrates that most children can distinguish reality from fantasy by the age of six. They are clearly able to differentiate between cruelty to real people and cruelty to cartoon characters.

What has been well established, in the laboratory research as well as in field studies, is that media have different effects on different individuals, depending on a combination of interrelated factors including the family and community

to which they belong, their mental health and emotional stability, degree of self-esteem, personal values, peer relationships, and prior history of aggressive behavior. A 1972 surgeon general's report found that "there is a preliminary and tentative indication of a causal relation between viewing violence on television and aggressive behavior; an indication that any such causal relation operates only on some children (who are predisposed to be aggressive); and an indication that it operates only in some environmental contexts" (Cater & Strickland, 1975, p.76). In 2001, the U. S. Surgeon General's report on youth violence concluded that while there was evidence that exposure to media violence could increase aggression in some children in the short term, numerous questions remained regarding long-term effects. After an extensive analysis of media effects research, Freedman concluded (2002, p. 20) that media violence explains only about 10% of the variability in viewer aggression.

Alfie Kohn (2000) draws a similar conclusion from the research: "what emerges from a review of more than a hundred empirical studies [is that] there is very little about television viewing, per se, that is cause for alarm, according to the available evidence" (p. 168). Kohn points out that TV affects children in different ways, depending on age, gender, race, personality, patterns of family interaction, who else happens to be watching with them, what programs are being watched, and why they are being watched. An effect will always be the relationship between a certain child, a certain type of television show, and a certain type of situation (p. 170). Kathleen McDonnell (1994, p. 119) observes that the majority of children who watch violent programs do not act out what they see. This work points to the important responsibility of family members to monitor how much television and what kind of program is watched by children in their households. Research does confirm that when violence on television is discussed with children in a constructive way, the effect it has on them is reduced (Anderson, 1997).

It is increasingly acknowledged that factors such as family interaction patterns, personality, emotional stability, predisposition to aggression, and the context of viewing play an important mediating role in the relationship between television viewing and its effects. Audiences do not absorb culture like sponges. They construct their own texts from what they read and view. Meaning cannot be predicted or assumed by others. Research in the area of cultural studies demonstrates that viewers, including children and youth, are able to decode texts in a variety of ways including accep-

tance, negotiation, and resistance to intended meanings (Hall et al., 1980). David Buckingham (1990), in his research with eleven and twelve year olds, found that rather than being duped by television commercials, students enjoyed ads for their music, graphics, and cleverness. They were not easily taken in by the messages. We need to give up the search for linear effects emanating directly from the medium to the individual. Efforts need to be shifted towards investigating how meanings are constructed and negotiated, and how they are likely to be enacted in the real worlds of the children. Perhaps it is time to change the question from "what does the media do to kids?" to "what do kids do with the media?"

As adults, we use the media for a variety of purposes—relaxation, entertainment, information, and escape, among other things. Why should children not view media with the same variety of purposes, provided they do it in moderation? If use of the media is part of a well-balanced and active life that includes time spent on other interests and activities, perhaps it is not such a bad thing. In fact, some researchers have found that media may contribute to children's lives in positive ways. Susan Newman (1988) reported that a modest amount of television viewing appeared to be positively related to young children's reading scores. In another study, Newman (1997) found that the skills and information that children acquire from their experiences with media provide them with knowledge and strategies that may contribute to their literacy learning. For example, students learn a lot from the media about genre, plot, character development, setting, and narrative structure that transfers directly to print literacy. Like Newman, Sara Braggs (2002) found that her high school students learned about the conventions of various genres from the media. What they learned transferred to their writing and their video scripts. In another study Rakes (1999) found that there is also evidence to suggest that short term working memory can be increased by presenting the same information in different media forms. It is Greenfield's (1984) contention that playing video and computer games enhances cognitive development along with motor skills.

It is unrealistic to expect that we can shield children from the media. Like it or not, children are going to encounter it—if not in their own homes, then in other people's homes and in public places. What we need to do is provide young people with knowledge about, and experience with, media so that they can become both well-informed and selective consumers, and creative media producers. This is the dual role that media education can play.

Media education has often been structured around a deficit model of teaching whereby the media are viewed as bad, kids are perceived as passive and vulnerable, and media literacy is proposed as the remedy that will enable students to see the error of their ways. A more effective alternative to this approach is the acquisition model (Desmond, 1997) in which teachers build on students' experiences with the media in ways that are positive and educationally sound. This model adopts a more student-centered pedagogy that connects the world of school to the everyday lives and experiences of students. Unfortunately, the shared cultural knowledge that youth possess about television, movies, and popular music is typically left on the doorstep when they arrive at school each day. But, as noted above, children do glean a great deal about narrative style and structure from the media and this knowledge can be constructively used in their schoolwork. The acquisition model of media literacy recognizes, validates, and builds upon the knowledge that students have about the media by capitalizing on their interest in it. Although students are often more media-savvy than we give them credit for; there is, nevertheless, much that they can learn about media, especially with regard to the use of technology. In addition, students can learn about the key concepts of media literacy and the processes of media production. They can also develop some of the analytical skills needed to help them become more astute encoders and decoders of media.

The best way to develop critical and analytical media skills is to have students produce their own media, whether it be a school newspaper, class comic book, music video, closed-circuit TV news show, or video documentary. In this way students are encouraged to become creative thinkers and problem-solvers as they script, storyboard, produce, and evaluate media for a variety of purposes and audiences. As a result, critical viewing skills emerge naturally and authentically as a by-product of the production process. This approach is much more effective than teachers' lectures about the motives and manipulations of the media and lessons focusing on deconstructing students' viewing pleasures.

When students are encouraged to produce their own media, they quickly learn the key concepts of media literacy such as agency, category, technology, language, audience, and representation. In the process, students are also provided with the opportunity to mediate, rework, and in some cases resist the messages of the media (Grace & Tobin, 1997). When students produce, assess, and evaluate their own media

products, they gain new understandings and learn to explore issues related to the news, advertisements, movies, television shows, political commentary, public service announcements, and other media genres. Students also acquire interests and skills that transfer from the media they create to the media they view.

Participation in production processes also broadens opportunities for future careers. It breaks down gender boundaries, particularly for girls, as they learn new technologies and experiment with production roles typically held by males (Grace, 2003). In addition, in producing news reports and video documentaries students are empowered to research issues in their community and become advocates for change.

As students learn to become producers, rather than merely consumers of the media, they acquire new knowledge and skills that are needed for the technology-driven and electronically mediated culture in which we live. In the process, they are offered innovative opportunities for creative expression and gain experience in using new modes of communication in the classroom. Today's youth are the media makers of tomorrow. And as technology evolves and the demands of society continue to change, the need to integrate media literacy into the elementary, secondary and university curriculum becomes stronger and more important. In the following articles, we find some fine examples of teachers in Hawai'i doing just that.

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