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Developing Media Literacy: Managing Fear and Moving Beyond Katherine Fry

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Abstract

One way to view the development of the media literacy movement is through the various different ways in which strains of media literacy education have been called on to allay fears that accompanying new media technologies. This article focuses on how one media literacy organization, The LAMP, deals with two very different arenas—the internet safety arena and the news literacy arena—where fear of digital media has created narrow pockets of concern seeking narrow solutions. As media literacy grows and develops the hope is that these fears subside, a perception of separateness dissolves, and a broader media literacy vision advances.

Keywords: *The LAMP, media literacy, news literacy, internet safety*

Historically, new media technologies bring with them both new ways to communicate and new, unforeseen problems. The problems often unleash new, untold fears. In fact, it may be that, historically and in varying degrees, fear has been *the* catalyst for media literacy efforts. It may also be that media literacy has been in some respects an effort in fear management. For a very long time, educators, parents, policymakers and concerned others have feared the impact of media on children, starting with the early film industry, and ramping up significantly when television became a major cultural force. The currently unfolding digital era brings with it a whole new set of changes, problems and fears. As media literacy educators well know, young people have been and continue to be a target for the expression of culture-wide fears about the whole array of changes afoot. But how, and by whom, the issues and fears are perceived and handled has varied widely. The history of the media literacy movement can be examined as a study in the way communication changes have been perceived and handled amongst different groups.

Fear in Your Face

Following is one account of a fear-inducing incident. On a weekday morning a few years back, I participated in a meeting held in the office of the principal of a Brooklyn neighborhood parochial school. There were four of us in attendance: my colleague and I, co-founders of a media literacy organization called The Learning About Multimedia Project (The LAMP), the principal of the school, and the police captain from the local precinct. We all sat around a table discussing a recent incident wherein a middle school-aged boy had used a cell phone to send a threatening text to several classmates. I cannot recall whether the texting incident happened on school grounds or off, but I remember that the principal was beside herself with worry as she described the incident and shared her fears about the implications of such communication. What new form of bullying and violence would be unleashed with these phones that so many students were now carrying? The substance of the text in question was threatening enough that the local police were asked to intervene. Parents were upset; the principal was upset; the police captain was livid. The principal had contacted us, the LAMP, she explained, because

she heard that we could help the school address the problem and any future such incidents.

As we began to describe the various ways in which we could work with parents and students to help them develop healthy digital relationships, the policeman cut us off short. “No,” he exclaimed loudly, slapping both hands down on the table for emphasis. “That’s not what we want you to do.” He leaned in towards us from across the table and said, lower and slower, “We want you to come in and scare the s*** out of them.” The principal nodded in agreement. Despite our efforts to convince them that our less aggressive, less fear-mongering approach might be more effective, we were not asked back.

This one incident from the field illustrates well the tremendous amount of fear, almost panic, adults express for children when new communication devices bring with them both new ways to communicate and new, unexpected consequences. While all of us in that principal’s office ultimately wanted the same thing—that the newly-adopted cell phones would be used appropriately and responsibly by everyone so that at the very least no one need be afraid or feel insecure—we were completely divided in our approaches. We imagined two very different ways of getting there.

Many Roads to Media Literacy

When it comes to reaching destination media literacy, there are a number of different routes. The destination is that place where people are thoughtful, competent, savvy, and knowledgeable about all of their media. But it is also that place where media literacy educators—and to some degree the larger population—understand that when we (all of us, and not just young people) change our means of communication, we change so much about how we live day to day. More significantly, we change plenty about how we understand ourselves in the world. To push the travel metaphor further, media literacy as a whole has worked to construct a series of different roads, maps, even GPS systems to help us get there. It may be accurate to say that those involved in media literacy in any capacity (as practitioners, advocates, educators and the like) share similar concerns and goals. Definitions of what media

literacy is and is not might be all over the map, but higher aspirations are shared. Though not everyone articulates them exactly the same way, ultimately we are all interested in helping people realize the higher human ideals of critical thought, deep understanding, fulfillment, justice, equality and/or democracy. But we construct our paths out of very different materials. Sometimes they’re paved with various fears: fears of threat or fears of change.

Is It Media Literacy or Something Else?

Working in the realm of media literacy both as an academic and in the field is interesting in part because one is continually confronted with all of the ways it is perceived and defined. It is quite fascinating all of the ways in which we parse media literacy. What *are* all the different pieces? Who gets to say which pieces are media literacy, per se, and which pieces should be called something else? Admirably, there are organizations, The National Association of Media Literacy Educators (NAMLE) a major one in the United States, whose founders and leaders have worked hard to hone a working definition which allows us to understand what, collectively, we are pursuing, even very broadly. This is enormously useful because of the developed and shared literature, knowledge, mission and connections. Collectively questions are posed, goals set, and a movement’s history develops. But media—like communication, and everyone who participates in its study, production, industry, and education—is so many different things, depending upon where you set your focus. And since everyone’s lives are so enmeshed with media and communication, naturally almost everyone has a view, especially a view about how to assess competency or literacy.

For some, to be “literate” means to focus on very narrow concerns, in a very reactionary way, and driven largely by fear. Indeed this is what is referred to in the field as the protectionist approach to media literacy education (Hobbs 1998). Perhaps this is to be expected, and perhaps this is one way of telling the story of media literacy’s development—as a growing effort to address problems within narrowly focused areas of anxiety, at least initially. Ideally the perceived problems and the anxieties will eventually

become connected, the fear will subside, and in time be replaced with understanding and action.

Following are two examples, or case studies, both of which illustrate in very different ways how The LAMP has confronted the concerns or fears of change wrought by digital communication technology within two very different arenas. In both cases, The LAMP's definition of—and approach to—media literacy encompasses those concerns. However, each community, separately and each in a different way, does not necessarily share The LAMP's approach and definition. The first case involves the way some organizations and institutions have narrowed the many issues surrounding digital communication to one: "internet safety." In this case, safety is seen as the sole paradigm for considering the way young people connect and communicate in the digital realm. The second case involves the insistent way in which news literacy is often defined separately from media literacy as if they are completely separate domains. Each case illustrates a very different issue, but what connects them is a fundamental fear of how the Internet, and digital communication generally, has shifted communication practice: interpersonally, collectively, and professionally.

Before elaborating each case as an example of one area of concern that falls within the widely defined domain of media literacy, it's best to explain The LAMP's conception of that domain. Within the culturally and economically diverse, yet media-rich, metropolis that is New York City, The LAMP provides a specific model of media literacy programming to various constituents, many of whom have very specific goals—like the principal at the school mentioned above. The challenge is to help each constituent group not only achieve their specific goals but also broaden their vision, crafting media literacy curricula addressing their unique concerns, yet remaining true to The LAMP's clear pedagogical core and set of principles. The core educational thrust of The LAMP's media literacy model is critical education in, and understanding of, media messages *and* technologies, combining core concepts from critical pedagogy, critical cultural studies and media ecology.

The LAMP has adopted a definition of media literacy that privileges messages *and* means. The organization gives equal weight to the messages or content of media *and* to the means or the technologies that shape those messages. More specifically, in addition to adopting the widely accepted NAMLE definition of media literacy in terms of the five core competencies centered on message access, analysis, creation and reflection (see Hobbs, 2011), The LAMP interrogates separately the very concept of media. The media ecology strand within The LAMP's media literacy education model requires that programming focus where necessary on the ways in which messages are shaped by media technologies and how that, in turn, shapes the way we understand the messages and each other (Fry, 2014). Within this strand, some important questions to explore are: What *are* the media we interact with today? What are their defining characteristics? How do the varying modes of text, sound, and image, for example, differently shape messages and the ways in which they can be interpreted? How, for example, does an ad in a magazine differ from a commercial on television? On what dimensions do we compare them as modes of persuasion? Likewise, how does a news story in print, which is mostly text, differ from a television news story that employs moving and still images, sound and text (and graphics and various editing techniques, etc.)? Again, The LAMP strives in much of its programming to foreground the means and modes of communication as much as, and separately from, the messages. The messages themselves are also analyzed, but not separate from their means.

In that same vein, but in a broader context, communication media are understood to create totalizing cultural environments. In other words, as McLuhan, Postman and many others within the media ecology perspective explain, communication environments shape *not only how we communicate with each other*, but also *how we understand ourselves, others, and the world at large* (Strate 2012). Currently we are in the thick of a major shift to an all-encompassing digital communication environment that is re-shaping our culture. For The LAMP, media literacy understands the many different ways of thinking about what media (as

businesses, genres, messages, technologies) are and do, and what all of that means. This is The LAMP's media literacy paradigm (Fry 2014). Within this paradigm many levels of understanding can be reached and many different areas of concern and fear can be addressed. They are not separate from each other, but part of a larger historical/cultural shift. And they connect in one field of vision.

Working within this paradigm, however, one becomes easily frustrated when confronted by constituent groups and individuals who don't share that larger view, who see their particular narrow concerns or genres taking absolute center stage to the exclusion of all other concerns, as the following two cases illustrate.

Case #1: Internet Safety. The first case is an extension of the Brooklyn parochial school example from the beginning. It is the Internet safety issue, where for some concerned groups, the only important thing to address regarding young people and their relationship with the internet and digital devices is safety. In 2007, when The LAMP was co-founded, and for many years prior, a major concern among parents, educators and law enforcement officials was the issue of Internet predators. That particular concern, though still alive, has now taken a back seat to cyberbullying, sexting and other such ways in which young people can harm or be harmed. These kinds of communication or behavioral problems have come to be not only the most important, but the only, issues of concern. The typical scenario is that there is an incident where one or a group of young people have a negative experience with online communication (leading to sometimes devastating consequences for them such as humiliation, ostracism, even death), and various adult groups learn about it, either first-hand or through news reports, and as a result alarmed education and/or parent groups (Parent-Teacher Associations, Teacher's Unions, etc.) respond by wanting, immediately and forcefully, to address that negative, fear-inducing communication behavior. This is completely understandable on one level. This is fear in your face, and it's real.

There is a problem with this approach, however, and the problem is two-fold. First, addressing just the safety issue assumes that the Internet and digital communication are dangerous

across the board, at least for young people. Second, it's a reaction based completely on fear. What happens is that the fear takes center stage, and certain behaviors and incidents are perceived outside of a much larger historical and cultural context of technological change. The bigger context reveals that young people and their many communication uses, experiences and behaviors are part of a much larger cultural shift which has been happening for quite some time, and which has been ignored within the formal educational realm, at least in much of the U.S. Since the changes are happening much more quickly now, and digital devices are readily available to more young people, isolated, yet profoundly negative, incidents become magnified. Without a solid media literacy education in place, there is no solid foundation from which anyone can respond in such situations; so panic ensues.

Indeed, responding to that panic, there are individuals and organizations that have launched successful crusades on the Internet safety issue to the detriment, one could argue, of deeper understanding. It becomes harder, then, for a media literacy organization such as The LAMP to have a reasoned discussion about the totality of changes and how a comprehensive media literacy approach can address them along with many other important issues. Adults who are scared for their kids don't want broad, long-term media literacy education; they want immediate Internet safety training. This is a frustrating challenge for a media literacy organization with a broad vision. When The LAMP is invited to run a program on Healthy Digital Relationships in a school or other organization, for example, participants in the program (and their concerned adults) come to understand all of the issues, opportunities and risks involved with communicating in the cybersphere, including not only safety, but also privacy, creativity, playing with identity, evaluating sources and many, many other issues that make up the complex of online communication, including the ways in which digital and mobile communication devices re-organize our everyday lives.

Case #2: News Literacy. Another interesting challenge concerns some facets of the news literacy movement. Just over three years ago, The LAMP was asked to participate in a news literacy summit

for high school students at a New York City public university. When asked to participate in the summer, The LAMP offered to do a workshop focused on the economics of news, teaching high school-aged participants about the constraints put on news by advertisers, for example, who pay most of the bill in commercial news organizations. Thus they could understand one of the major forces shaping what news becomes. That suggestion, to put it mildly, was soundly rejected by the summit organizers. The reason that workshop could not happen, it was explained, was because it did not address a *news* literacy topic; it addressed a *media* literacy topic. The LAMP was further instructed that news literacy is focused on teaching young people how to discern good information from bad online, and specifically to distinguish quality journalism from mere opinion on the Internet.

Clearly, at that particular moment, within that particular pocket of the news literacy movement, fear of what the Internet was doing to the traditional business and professional model of journalism (particularly via the threat of bloggers and citizen journalists) was the fuel. Any suggestion that news literacy might not only be connected to, but a part of, a broader media literacy effort fell on deaf ears. It is more accurate to say that the suggestion was very loudly and very emotionally rejected. Through some discussion and negotiation, The LAMP did end up offering a very well attended workshop at the summit which focused on the various ways in which communication modes of sound, text and image differently shape news. Specific examples were drawn from radio, TV and newspapers. That was the compromise, and a happy one for The LAMP because it allowed the organization to draw on its media ecology strand of media literacy education, which is one of its core pedagogical principles.

Both of these cases illustrate fearful reactions to the developing digital media environment. Granted, there is a place for a good, healthy dose of concern in media literacy. Young people absolutely must be aware and wary when they communicate online. They need to be safe. Safety includes many different things, not only for young people but also for everyone. And everyone absolutely must be able to competently evaluate news and information,

distinguishing the reliable from the questionable in a world where the very definition of journalism is changing as digital media re-shapes the genre and the profession (see Moeller 2009; Mihailidis 2011).

However, neither Internet safety nor news literacy is an area that needs to stand alone, off by itself. A solid media literacy foundation easily encompasses both in a much larger domain. A broad-based historically contextualized media literacy connects these two and many other areas of concern. But it must be built correctly and adopted early, before a crisis. Ideally, in place of crisis.

Different Definitions or Just Different Roads?

The LAMP's experiences navigating the fears of constituent communities are not unique in the world of media literacy education. They illustrate how the whole media literacy enterprise is developing. As communication practices, messages and technologies develop, industries change, habits change, and culture changes. The changes and the fears accompanying them can each be addressed separately, or they can be examined together. Efforts to address them as separate problems encourages isolation. There is no need for such isolation. They *all* belong to the larger domain of media literacy. This is one way of looking at the way the field of media literacy has developed and is developing. It has been the construction of different roads linking sometimes-isolated areas or pockets of concern. As these areas link, the media literacy map grows and changes. Perhaps we need a satellite view of the map in progress to give us that much-needed bird's eye view. It would be best if we could get it digitally, though – and preferably on our smart phones.

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