

***Is that media literacy?:
Israeli and US media scholars' perceptions of the field***

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ABSTRACT

Sixty-nine media scholars from Israel and the United States responded to an online questionnaire aimed to identify the boundaries of media literacy. The participants received a list of thirty-two potential titles for a final paper and were asked to rate the relevancy of each topic for an undergraduate media literacy course. While the statistical analysis showed no significant difference in the ranking, deviations and distributions demonstrate disagreements as to what is important or marginal in the field. Protectionist topics were ranked high as well as topics involving children, digital media, and popular culture. It also appears that media education has become associated with social activism. Only five out of thirty-two topics reveal significant differences among Israeli and US scholars on a p-value of 0.10. However, this difference could reflect political and cultural processes that yielded various social agendas in each society over the last decade.

Keywords: *media literacy, empowerment, protectionism, media studies.*



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INTRODUCTION

Media literacy education as a blurry subject matter

A few years ago, Ornat Turin, the first author of this essay asked her undergraduate students in Israel to write a paper in a media literacy education course. As she was sorting through the students' ideas for the assignment, she felt uncomfortable about some proposals, wondering whether the topics these students suggested fell within the jurisdiction of media literacy education. Ornat wondered why media students demonstrated such a vague understanding of media literacy education. As she kept thinking, Ornat realized that she herself was also not confident about the definition of this subject matter. How could that be possible?

In this paper, we discuss perceptions of media literacy education by looking at results of a survey that involved American and Israeli media scholars. Our students can be unsure about the nature of the field, but how about people who are supposed to be experts? We were wondering whether responses of the latter would be more coherent. Our exploratory study was meant to offer reflection on the state of media literacy, building on debates that have strived to define the field in the past (see RobbGrieco, 2018). Some call for changing the media literacy curriculum based on the claim that the whole field has become more fragmented than it used to be (Phillips, 2016). Others go as far as to argue that the common theoretical base is weakening, which in turn affects our disciplinary borders and its professional image (McQuail, 2010). Understanding the variety of perceptions that define the field is important for its development and future.

On the following pages, we offer a brief account of the multidisciplinary nature of media literacy education, and of the attempts to reach a consensus about its goals and practices around the world. We offer an overview of the debate between Renee Hobbs and James Potter on the state of media literacy education. Although the debate took place in 2010-2011, we believe that the themes and contradictions that it uncovered are essentials for understanding the field of media literacy today. We then explain our methodology and lay out results of the survey we conducted in light of the main points of contradiction in the exchange between Potter and Hobbs.

Our hope is that this project will encourage members of the media literacy community, as well as communication and education scholars more broadly, to be more mindful about the contradictory nature of the

field. By using the past debates in the field to understand its current challenges and prospects, we hope to overcome uncertainties similar to the one that Ornat found herself facing as she was sorting through final paper topics in her Israeli university.

Media literacy and its contradictions

Media literacy education is sometimes described as existing on the intersection of communication studies and education (Buckingham, 2003; First & Adoni, 2006). As such, connects two areas that have previously suffered from blurry boundaries. In their development, communication studies drew on sociology, psychology, political science, and literature (Couldry, 2013). One of the indications of its interdisciplinarity is cited by Briggie and Christians (2010), who pointed out the fact that BA degrees in Communication did not appear in American universities until the 1990s. Until the beginning of 2000, the faculty who worked in media departments had doctorate degrees in other subject matters.

As for education, its status as a discipline is still under debate. To be qualified as a teacher, one needs to study such courses as philosophy of education, sociology of education, and psychology of education. In other words, education lacks a unique and independent theoretical body that future practitioners could study (Loughran, 2009). In this sense, one cannot help noticing important parallels between the two parental disciplines of media literacy education. This ancestry explains the interdisciplinary and fragmented nature of the field.

In order to receive legitimacy, attract funding, and hire faculty, academics from an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary field must argue that they offer a unique theoretical framework and methodology (Herbst, 2008). Notably, media literacy proponents place their field's strength not in theory, but in practices and their outcomes. For instance, they have claimed to improve people's quality of life, with a special focus on children. The field highlights the need to develop a series of competences, such as critical thinking and media production (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2010; Goodman, 2003; Scheibe & Rogov, 2011).

One indication of this fragmented nature is the lack of departments for media literacy. Scholars usually associate themselves with the fields of communication or education (Calhoun, 2011; Bulger & Davison, 2018). Similarly, while numerous high-ranking journals exist in these disciplines, there are much fewer journals that

would define their aim as publishing articles specifically in the field of media literacy education.

Finally, it is important to point out that media literacy has been graced with many definitions. Over the years, scholars and practitioners came to conferences and wrote academic articles, white papers, reports and teachers' guides while trying to reach a consensus about the nature and objectives of the field (FrieSEM & FrieSEM, 2019). It is difficult to recollect similar efforts in other fields, where basic principles seem to be less debated. This very striving to reach an agreement about the nature of media literacy suggests a certain discomfort regarding the field's identity (Rosenbaum et al., 2008).

Contradictions in the understanding of media literacy and challenges for its coherence intensify when we look at intercultural differences (Mommers, 2013; Polakevičová & Lincényi, 2017). Various studies show how different nations understand goals and practices of media literacy education (Livingstone & van der Graaf, 2010; Ranieri & Fabbro, 2016). Forms of media education in each nation are linked to local terminology: media literacy, digital literacy, and media competence (Polakevičová & Lincényi, 2017; Zylka et al., 2011). Variance in labels is not merely a matter of zeitgeist. Each term reflects deep philosophies stemming from a complicated matrix of different sociopolitical and historical contexts.

The media literacy community is well familiar with the state of the field in the Anglo-Saxon region, the US, Canada, and the UK, as these countries have a long history of leading the discourse internationally. Even so, Kubey (1998) explained the lagging of US media education in the 90s by its geographical landscape. The physical size of the States and the country's highly heterogeneous population has caused resistance to accepting a federal curriculum. At the same time, these challenges are well known and researched.

Things become increasingly complicated when we attempt to understand the development of media literacy education in non-English speaking countries. The variances in perceptions of media literacy between nations and lack of knowledge about some parts of the nonwestern world make it difficult to evaluate the state of media literacy on the global level. This is so, despite the existence of important studies about a variety of non-English-speaking countries (Fedorov & FrieSEM, 2015; Simonson et al., 2013; Zylka et al., 2011).

In light of the role of sociopolitical context in shaping media literacy, we decided to look at perceptions of media literacy education by scholars in

the United States and Israel. Our rationale was that this approach would provide an advantage because of important similarities between these two countries. At the same time, we were wondering if there will be some cultural differences in understanding of media literacy education connected to broader cultural differences and contexts.

US vs. Israeli Media literacy education

In the United States, media studies can be traced back to the discipline of communication that grew from scholarship in journalism, debates, and advertising. Speech and rhetoric were also essential as foundational elements of the field, as the origin of the National Communication Association (NCA) demonstrates. In the beginning of the 20th Century, social science scholars in the US (e.g. Dewey) combined scholarship in education and communication. However, with the growth of US academy, the specialization of each field drew the two disciplines apart.

The Israeli academic tradition of media research is largely drawn from American institutions. Many academics in Israel have completed their doctorate in the USA. The academic standard in Israel follows the US model as an ideal for excellence. This is true for the entire communication and education disciplines as well as media literacy (First & Adoni, 2006). In Israel, the UK influence on media studies was crucial. Communication and media studies emerged in the 1980's as a form of film programs in arts that were placed separately from the new communication departments in social sciences and separately from education programs that focused on teacher education.

Most of Israeli media scholars received their academic education in US universities or from Israeli scholars who brought the US media studies approach, but there are also differences between the two countries. While the Israeli academy is highly influenced by the UK cultural studies and the US scholarship on media effects, the political and religious conflict take the center stage in Israeli media literacy. US issues of urban and rural consumption of media are translated in Israel as issues of center and periphery. In contrast, issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion that are reflecting the developing ethics of the US academia are not transferred to the Israeli academy beyond religious and ethnic tensions.

As for media literacy education, the two countries vary in the historical roots of the practice that is getting more and more similar. The US media literacy education

started almost a century ago with English teachers who implemented critical analysis of media such as radio and cinema. English teachers used to be public speaking teachers who historically taught what later transformed into communication classes and now are part of ELA (English Language Arts) or social science classes. In the last thirty years, with the affordability of digital tools, more and more schools have media production courses such as broadcast journalism, radio/podcasting, graphic design, coding, and app design.

In Israel, media literacy classes started as film appreciation and production classes in the 1980's. Later, undergraduate programs in communication allowed more teachers to be certified to become media literacy teachers. The conflict between Israel and Palestine shaped a particular image of media education in Israel: the polarization of points of view, the debate over the trustworthiness of the political and historical narrative, the call to embrace all political sides within media education. Lemish and Lemish (1997) described how the social and political division in Israel contributed to the prosperity of media literacy. While the US has a decentralized curriculum that allows innovations and at the same time promotes a fragmented practice around the country, Israel has a national curriculum and network of media literacy teachers.

Although the historical roots are different, Israeli scholarship in media literacy is based on US and UK media studies. In addition, both countries are experiencing a growth in technology integration and demand for digital literacy from educators and pre-service teachers (Francom, 2019; Goldstein et al., 2011). And yet in both countries, a media literacy curriculum is far from being widely adopted in classrooms. Similarly, in the academic world, media literacy scholarship is often seen as a marginalized subfield in-between media studies and educational technology. This lack of clarity in media literacy education as an academic field and educational practice contributes to gaps in the mutual understanding of the academic world and the practical field. This gap is especially evident in debates that have shaped the current form of media literacy education.

Hobbs and Potter debate

Some note that media literacy education is defined by its debates rather than consensus (Friesem & Friesem, 2019; RobbGrieco, 2018). Considering all the contradictions present within and between the cultural contexts we chose to focus on, it was essential to find a unifying theoretical framework that would help us

explore the current understanding of media literacy education among its scholars and practitioners. We decided that the debates of media literacy education can (perhaps counterintuitively) provide such a framework. We decided to explore what is considered one of the formative debates of the field: the polemics between Renee Hobbs and James Potter that took place in 2010-2011 on the pages of the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* (Hobbs, 2011a; Hobbs, 2011b; Potter, 2010; Potter, 2011).

Controversies have the power to promote science and that is the case for media literacy (Friesem & Friesem, 2019). As Katz and his colleagues state, "Our canonic text contains a lot of difference of opinion, There is no reason to believe that these debates will subside, but paradoxically the boundaries of the field emerge from such debate" (Katz et al., 2003, p. 7). In this sense, the debate between Hobbs and Potter has great importance for understanding the different approaches to core values, premises, and margins of media literacy.

In 2010, Potter was asked by JoBEM to write a review on the state of the field. In his paper, he defined it as "a large complex patchwork of ideas that displays considerable variety in the way it is defined" (Potter, 2010, p. 675). He reviewed several attempts to articulate a definition and summarized a range of characteristics. Potter pointed out that the media impact individuals in a variety of ways and that media consumers are more vulnerable when they are passive. Potter described critical thinking as the essential component of media literacy education – the ability to examine and identify authors' ideologies. Potter then classified the media literacy curricula, describing the distinction between European and American traditions. Finally, he offered his predictions about the future of the field: its path between new media and technology on one side and art and humanities on the other.

For our purpose, it is important to note that Potter reviewed intervention programs on issues of violence in the media, sexuality, health, stereotypes, and fear-inducing content. When reviewing a field of studies, it is impossible to include everything. One must select, and Potter chose case-studies that demonstrated a protectionist approach — looking at media as having a negative influence while presenting media literacy education as a cure.

In Hobbs' opinion, Potter's attempt to impose order on the wider field of media literacy caused a reduction in depth and complexity. She argued that the choices he made describing the branching field through the

protectionist approach painted a picture that omitted significant developments of the past decade. For Hobbs, these absences were not just an omission; they distorted the essence of media literacy education. Hobbs' criticism of Potter's review can be described as a clash of a protectionist media studies scholar (Potter) with an empowerment media educator (Hobbs). Hobbs argued that in the process of media literacy education, instead of passive consumers, young people become active producers. The digital revolution enabled students to consume and produce media content while participating in online discourse as both consumers and producers. For Hobbs, it was important to acknowledge that children can search for information, respond to it, and then create their messages using their unique voices. So teaching media literacy needs to be done considering the pleasure children and youth derive from creating cultural artifacts.

Potter emphasized the goal of media literacy education to change young people's attitudes and behavior. In contrast, Hobbs pointed out that in the decade before the debate, the field had moved away from persuading students to replace their views on issues such as media violence to helping them become independent learners. This radical change in pedagogical approach could be summed up as a move from the teacher-centered pedagogy toward the learner-centered one. Hobbs argued that it is important to understand that when media education is delivered from the perspective of media effects, it is based on the pedagogy of persuasion and aims to change the mindset and behavior of students in a way desired by the teacher. However, when adopting a constructivist approach, students are encouraged to be curious researchers and autonomous thinkers, not passive regurgitators of the teacher's wisdom. In other words, they are offered a fishing rod rather than the fish itself.

Finally, according to Hobbs, Potter missed the structural changes that had occurred at the practitioners' level. Over the years, media educators had complained about the gap between declarations of the need for media literacy and its absence in the school curriculum. It was not until after digital literacy was recognized as a form of media literacy education that policymakers acknowledged the necessity to integrate media literacy into schools. This dramatic change strengthened the cooperation between academic institutions and schools. Hobbs argued that this shift should be included in any description of media literacy education as a contemporary field. The correspondence between Hobbs and Potter continued through four different

essays, raising many issues that are beyond the scope of this paper.

We chose to base our inquiry on the Potter-Hobbs debate because it represented the tension between media scholars (Potter) and media literacy practitioners (Hobbs) that is still relevant for the fragmented field of media literacy education. Although the debate happened a decade ago, its echo can be still heard in the current conversations about the purpose and direction of the field both in Israel and the United States (Friesem & Friesem, 2019; First & Adoni, 2006). While the historical roots of media literacy education in each country is different, the current gap between media scholars and educators might be contributing to the vagueness of the definition and differences in perceptions of its purpose.

Research questions

To understand how media literacy education is perceived by Israeli and US media scholars, we articulated two research questions:

1. What topics are perceived as the core and the margins of media literacy education?
2. What are similarities and differences in perceptions of Israeli and American scholars?

METHOD

In the fall of 2015, an online questionnaire was administered to a purposive sample of 67 media scholars who held a Ph.D. degree in media studies or communication and who worked in an academic setting. We anonymized the questionnaire to receive higher response rate. At the same time we did not collect any demographics to strengthen the anonymity of the participants. This is especially important for Israeli media scholars who work in a small and intimate community (their emails were obtained from the members' list of the Israeli Communication Association). In October 2015, 33 Israeli media scholars filled out the Hebrew version of the questionnaire.

After an unsuccessful attempt to use the same recruitment approach in the US, we decided to rely on personal requests to colleagues. During the spring of 2016, we used a snowball technique to collect answers from 34 US communication and media scholars who filled out the English version of the questionnaire. Thus, our data reflects our network connections. All participants in our sample are coming from the field of media studies and not education, although most of them

teach media studies at the college level (more about that in the Limitations section). The participants combined their understanding of media literacy from their media study degree, teaching media in higher education, and conducting research in the field of media studies.

Research tool

The questionnaire included 30 made-up topics for a student paper in an alleged course on Media Literacy Education. We aimed to build a list that would sketch the broad range of topics that preservice teachers could encounter within media studies and media education. Each participant was asked to rank each item from 1 to 10 on a Likert scale according to the perceived relevance

of the topic for media literacy education. Table 1. presents the topics classified by the various subject areas using the terminology of International Communication Association (ICA) divisions, such as Media History and Instructional Communication. We used this division since it covers a range from media studies to communication education. We also included subfields such as Civic Education and Gender Studies that allowed us to assess the status of topics indirectly related to media literacy education. Finally, in designing the questionnaire, we aimed to represent all media literacy competences (Access, Analyze & Evaluate, Create, Reflect, and Act) as described by Hobbs (2010) by connecting the competencies with the ICA division and the paper topic.

Table 1. *Questionnaire Items, ICA divisions and MLE competencies*

| | Questionnaire Items | ICA Divisions* | MLE Competencies** |
|----|---|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | The perception of high-quality and low-quality children's television through the eyes of parents and educators. | Children, Adolescent & Media | Access |
| 2 | How to use Twitter and Instagram to promote feminist activism. | Feminist Scholarship | Act |
| 3 | Media ownership and organizations world map. | Political Communication | Access |
| 4 | Evaluation research on a Google tools course for senior citizens living in an elderly home. | Communication & Technology | Analyze & Evaluate |
| 5 | Life ambitions and views of reality shows among high school students. | Children, Adolescent & Media | Reflect |
| 6 | The portrayal of success in financial newspapers: Visual aspects. | Visual Communication | Analyze & Evaluate |
| 7 | Ownership convergence of electronic media in North America. | Political Communication | Access |
| 8 | The theatre of terror, the way terrorists are using the media for their own benefit. | Health Communication | Reflect |
| 9 | The promotion of Arab-Jewish dialogue through collaborative filmmaking in a teacher training college. | Global Communication | Create & Act |
| 10 | Latent meaning and gender perception in car advertisements from 1970 to 2015. | Popular Communication | Analyze & Evaluate |
| 11 | The effect of the film <i>The Matrix</i> on students' perception of privacy in the virtual world. | Visual Communication | Reflect |
| 12 | The usage pattern of cellular phones in the lowest grade of primary school. | Information Systems | Access |
| 13 | The empowerment of girls' physical self-esteem by preparing a "portfolio" for modeling agencies. | Children, Adolescent & Media | Create |
| 14 | The relationship between pensioners' level of education and television viewing patterns. | Mass Communication | Access |
| 15 | Promoting internet sites, comparing the viral versus mouth-to-ear rates of success. | Public Relations | Create |
| 16 | Legal rulings on the ethics of informant-journalist relationships in three democratic states. | Communication Law & Policy | Analyze & Evaluate |
| 17 | The beginning of Facebook: People share their memories. | History of Communication | Reflect |
| 18 | Gender representation in-joke books published between 1950-1980. | Feminist Scholarship | Analyze & Evaluate |

| Questionnaire Items | ICA Divisions* | MLE Competencies** |
|---|-------------------------------|--------------------|
| 19 Democracy education: A simulation of election day in high school, action research. | Political communication | Act |
| 20 How to promote home goods using children as an agency. | Public relations | Access |
| 21 Deep layers and gender perception in the work of filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar. | Visual communication | Analyze & Evaluate |
| 22 The telegraph and the zoetrope: Lost pages in the history of media technologies. | History of communication | Access |
| 23 Uses and gratification in the Candy Crush Saga game. | Game studies | Access & Reflect |
| 24 Usage pattern of cellular phones among combat versus secretarial soldiers. | Information systems | Access |
| 25 Who is afraid of the term feminist? Empowerment workshop for girls. | Feminist scholarship | Create & Act |
| 26 The history of formal and informal education for democracy and antiracism. | Race & Ethnicity | Analyze & Evaluate |
| 27 Coping with multicultural dilemmas while teaching sociology in school. | Intercultural communication | Analyze & Evaluate |
| 28 Kieslowski's <i>The Decalogue</i> : Retrospective after 20 years, interviews with religious clergies. | Visual communication | Analyze & Evaluate |
| 29 Communication with and among animals, not only mammals. | Language & Social interaction | Reflect |
| 30 The origin of the novel as a literary genre, from Richardson's <i>Pamela</i> to Thackeray's <i>Vanity Fair</i> . | History of communication | Analyze & Evaluate |

Note: *ICA divisions can be found here: <https://www.ica hdq.org/page/DivChairs>

**Media literacy competencies follow Renee Hobbs (2010) model: Access, Analyze & Evaluate, Create, Reflect, and Act.

Data analysis

We used a series of t-tests to analyze the differences between Israeli and US media scholars and descriptive statistics for the ranking order of the items as a whole. For each one of the thirty items we provided the average score between 1 to 10 and the standard deviation. The survey was prepared using a Google Form and the data were downloaded as an Excel spreadsheet that allowed us to perform the calculations of the means and standard deviations.

RESULTS

The lack of agreement among the 67 scholars was a significant finding related to our first research question. Practically each topic was ranked “zero” by some participants and “ten” by others. At the same time, for most of our fabricated paper topics, we found no significant variances in the scoring of the media scholars from both countries. This means that the same item was often perceived as relevant to media literacy education courses by some respondents and as being completely unrelated by others. However, even within the broad range, some topics were considered more relevant than others. Addressing the first research question, we found four themes that reflected the similarities and differences in the ranking between the Israeli and US

media scholars: protectionist approach, target audience, digital media, and popular culture.

An analysis of the ranking shows that protectionist topics were perceived as more relevant than subjects reflecting media production and enjoyment. For example, *The terror theater: The way terrorists use media* received the average score of 6.26 and *Convergence of ownership of electronic media in North America* received the score of 6.60. These topics implied that media consumer should develop better understanding of the media influence in their lives. Some topics representing empowerment processes to help fight inequalities received higher than average scores, for example *The empowerment of girls' physical self-esteem by preparing a portfolio for modeling agencies* received 5.65 points the same with *The promotion of Arab-Jewish dialogue through collaborative filmmaking* 6.23. Yet that was an exception rather than a pattern.

Looking at the average scores of each topic, we could see that children were perceived as the immediate target audience of media literacy education. While similar topics of the fabricated papers focused on older and younger audiences, the higher ranking tended toward the younger group age. For example, *Mobile phone use among elementary school children* earned an average relevancy score of 5.77 points, while *Mobile*

phone use among combatants and pencil officers was ranked 4.47. This finding suggests that teaching children is still seen as the main focus the field, although there is also some receptivity to other audiences, such as elderly using digital media.

Topics that named a specific target audience were more popular than topics that omitted such information. Although many protectionist topics were ranked higher than empowerment ones, when specific audience was named in relation to issues of diversity, equity and inclusion, the ranking showed prevalence of the perception of an audience as autonomous and creative. For example, *Jewish-Arab dialogue through cinema* was ranked 6.52 and *Promoting feminist activism through Instagram* was ranked 7.10.

However, when there were no clear relations to a specific social group, the average score dropped. For example, *The history of education for democracy and anti-racism* was ranked 3.79 and *Dilemmas in teaching multiculturalism* was ranked 3.35. Topics without clear reference to activism in their titles but with a clear definition of the target audience ranked higher. For example, *The relationship between pensioners' level of education and television viewing patterns* was ranked 5.58 and *Life aspirations and views of reality shows among high school students* was ranked 6.73.

In our study, participants were more inclined to favor topics connected to digital media than to the old media. To demonstrate, *The source of the novel as a literary genre* was rated the lowest in the sample (2.41). Compare it with topics that promised to explore “the beginning of Facebook” (5.12) or the role of “Twitter and Instagram to promote feminist activism” (7.7). The acknowledgment of the role of popular culture in media

literacy was showcased by participants' higher ratings of all topics that dealt with it. A topic with a Hollywood blockbuster *The effect of the film Matrix on the perception of privacy of students in the virtual world* was ranked 6.23, twice as high in comparison with the European independent film *Kieslowski's The Decalogue: Retrospective interviews with religious clergy*, which scored very low (3.12). Likewise, the title *Deep layers and gender perception in the work of director Pedro Almodóvar* received a low score (4.99) vis-a-vis another gender related-topic about car advertisements: *The perception of gender in advertisements for cars* (6.66).

Comparisons between Israeli and US responses

As for the second research question, our findings show that Israelis and US media scholars defined the five most relevant topics similarly. Table 3. shows the comparison between the five items that both the Israeli and US media scholars ranked the highest. Three topics were common to the two groups: the map of media ownership, the quality of children's television and the use of Instagram in feminist campaigns.

The differences between Israeli and US media scholars were investigated with a series of two tailed paired sample t-tests. The statistical procedures revealed more resemblance than dissimilarities. For most of our fabricated paper topics, we found no significant variances in the scoring of scholars from both countries. Only in 4 out of 30 topics a significant difference was discovered, as seen in Table 2 with significance value of 0.10.

Table 2. Differences in means of perceived relevancy, Israeli versus US ranking

| Topic | | Israel (n=33) | US (n=34) | t-value | p-value |
|---|----|------------------|--------------|---------|---------|
| Evaluation research on a Google tools course for senior citizens living in an elderly home. | M | 8.00 | 5.79 | 3.27 | 0.02 |
| | SD | (2.53) | (2.93) | | |
| The history of formal and informal education for democracy and antiracism. | M | 3.03 | .471 | -1.91 | 0.04 |
| | SD | (3.10) | (3.24) | | |
| The relationship between pensioners' level of education and television viewing patterns. | M | 6.48 | 5.06 | 1.70 | 0.07 |
| | SD | (3.28) | (3.14) | | |
| Democracy education: A simulation of Election Day in high school, action research. | M | 4.03 | 5.55 | -1.72 | 0.08 |
| | SD | (3.40) | (3.65) | | |

Table 3. Five highest ranking items in comparison between Israeli and US media scholars

| ISRAEL | | | US | | |
|--|------|------|--|------|------|
| Topic | Mean | SD | Topic | Mean | SD |
| 1 Google tools course for senior citizens | 8.00 | 2.53 | Media ownership and organizations world map | 7.27 | 2.78 |
| 2 High and low-quality children's television | 7.82 | 2.72 | Ownership convergence of electronic media in North America | 7.00 | 2.57 |
| 3 Twitter and Instagram to promote feminist activism | 7.73 | 2.55 | High and low-quality children's television | 6.89 | 2.75 |
| 4 Views of reality shows among high school students | 7.09 | 2.55 | Twitter and Instagram to promote feminist activism | 6.64 | 2.91 |
| 5 Media ownership and organizations world map | 6.73 | 3.58 | Terrorists use of media | 6.61 | 3.11 |

Table 3. showcases the five highest ranking items for each group of media scholars. The Israeli media scholars ranked topics involving the elderly higher than the US respondents did. The former also ranked higher such topics as *Google tools course for the elderly* and *Pensioner's education level and TV viewing patterns*. The US media scholars were more concerned with the struggle for democracy. They gave higher rates to awareness against racism and election related topics, for example *The history of formal and informal education for democracy and antiracism*.

The similarity between the media scholars from the two countries was four times greater than the variance.

At the same time, it is important to point out that the only significant difference between Israeli and US scholars arose in less than a fifth of the measured topics. Table 4. showcases the similarities between the two groups of scholars in their ranking of the least relevant topics in media literacy.

The history of the novel as a genre, communication with animals, canonical films, and multiculturalism when detached from the media are perceived as not being relevant subjects for a course in media literacy. At the bottom of the list, the consensus between the two groups appears to be obvious.

Table 4. The five least relevant topics in a comparison between Israeli and US media scholars

| ISRAEL | | | US | | |
|---|------|------|---|------|------|
| Topic | Mean | SD | Topic | Mean | SD |
| 1 Multicultural dilemmas in school | 3.25 | 3.42 | Uses & gratification in Candy Crush | 3.78 | 2.94 |
| 2 Kieslowski's The Decalogue | 3.03 | 3.02 | Multicultural dilemmas in school | 3.70 | 3.08 |
| 3 The history of education for democracy & antiracism | 3.03 | 3.11 | Kieslowski's The Decalogue | 2.80 | 2.40 |
| 4 Communication with animals | 2.64 | 2.55 | The origin of the novel as a literary genre | 2.33 | 2.33 |
| 5 The origin of the novel as a literary genre | 2.00 | 2.22 | Communication with animals | 1.97 | 2.71 |

To summarize the main results for the general ranking, the relevancy grades of 30 potential topics proposed for a final paper in a general course called Media Literacy Education revealed that topics involving young people ranked on average higher than subjects concerned with adults in both countries.

Anything related to digital media, the Internet, and mobile phones was rated higher than topics associated with the old age.

Products of popular culture and entertainment were perceived to be more appropriate for a media literacy education course than classic films and canonical works. Protectionism maintained its strong position, yet there was more room for alternative approaches and a broader range of topics under the umbrella of media literacy.

DISCUSSION

The focus of the current study is the perception of media literacy education by US and Israeli media scholars, especially their understanding of central or marginal issues is media literacy education. The answer to our first research question regarding the ranking and relevancy of 30 various topics was more complex due to the disagreement between the 67 participants. The debate between Potter (2010; 2011) and Hobbs (2011a; 2011b) offered a useful framework for discussing our findings.

The dichotomy of protectionism and empowerment emerged as one of the biggest issues in the Potter and Hobbs' conversation. The ranking provided by the media scholars in our sample shows that there is major influence by the protectionist approach coming from the academic world of media studies. This is evidenced by the fact that the participants in our study ranked higher topics that used the language of media effects and the protectionist approach, such as *The relationship between educational level and viewing patterns* or *The effect of watching Matrix on the perception of privacy*. This rating was higher than rating for topics dealing directly with the world of education, such as *Dilemmas in teaching multicultural education* or *A simulation of election day in high school*.

Furthermore, participants expressed their preference for the protectionist approach by revealing the perception of children as the target audience for media education who need to be shielded from the media effects. Titles dealing with children were ranked higher than those that named other age groups. And yet, issues of advocacy, such as gender equality and intercultural dialogue, especially through digital tools, were also highly rated. At the same time, it is important to note that practice-based topics representing the empowerment approach were also popular as some participants favored topics focusing on expression, creativity, and enjoyment.

While protectionist topics were often ranked higher, the overall results seem to support Hobbs' description of the broad spectrum of the field. The analysis of the findings shows that topics challenging the level of knowledge and understanding, such as traditional media literacy topics that use analysis, such as gender representation in-jokes, and descriptive themes such as cellular usage patterns gained medium ratings. At the same time, topics implying that students would earn a media skill such as editing film or preparing a photo portfolio were perceived as more relevant to the field.

Similarly, topic that suggested that learners can benefit from media literacy such as on the Google tools course for the elderly, received high ranking. We, therefore, believe that Hobbs was more accurate when she pointed out the role of production in contemporary media education as an opportunity for self-expression.

The findings show the relevancy of both protectionist and empowerment topics for media scholars who teach in higher education. Since the time of the debate between Hobbs and Potter, this dichotomy remains helpful for understanding of media literacy education as a field. Moreover, the rift between scholars and practitioners who focus on protectionism and empowerment respectively can explain the lingering contradictions in media literacy education, which we described in the beginning of our paper.

While topics that were protectionist ranked higher, the ranking tended to favor Hobbs' description of the broad spectrum of the audience of media literacy education. The examples and scholarship used by Potter positioned the audience as vulnerable, especially when it is passive and not armed with critical perception.

The debate between Hobbs and Potter echoed previous deliberations such as the limitation of positivistic effects research, the state of cultural studies, the relationship between academy and field practitioners, and perhaps most of all, the position of digital media in the field. Until the appearance of digital media, a certain order was established within the field of media literacy. It was possible to identify differences between the European tradition and the American, to spot roots from humanities and social sciences, and to distinguish the medium from the message. The new media have challenged this order by changing how knowledge is distributed, consumed, and directed.

The advent of digital media has intensified the blurry boundaries of media literacy education. Our findings show a preference for topics associated with digital media over those referring to print. Why should the history of the novel's appearance as a genre that has shaped western culture, which is closely related to leisure expansion and illiteracy decline, be considered less relevant than the early days of Facebook? The digital revolution has reshaped our perception of the field, even though the main theories and concepts seem to be unchanged (Todd, 2017). This can be a cause for another contradiction in media literacy education.

Finally, contradictions in the perceptions of the field may be explained by the fact that the legacy of cultural studies has created the preference for popular texts over canonical works. In the classrooms filled with young

people, this orientation has a practical value. We teach subjects such as the characters construction, structure of the plot, stereotypes, camera angles, etc. by using texts drawn from the world of children and their leisure culture. Aligned with the cultural studies legacy, most of the ranking in our study presented popular texts as more relevant to teaching media literacy than canonical media texts. At the same time, the older population of practitioners may still prefer canonical texts over examples drawn from the popular culture.

The findings suggest that differences in perception between Israeli and US media scholars are not significant. We expected that, due to variances in culture, political context, and state tradition, Israeli media scholars would grade the relevancy of paper topics in a different way than their US colleagues. It seems that, rather than cultural differences, we witness two separate social agendas that create differences in the relevancy rating between the two groups. The US media scholars' preference was for such topics as ownership convergence, terrorism, and antiracism education. This can be interpreted as a concern for democratic society involving issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. This concern seems more in line with the legacy, controversies, and constant discourse around democratic values in the polarized American society around the presidency of both Obama and Trump (the survey was administrated in 2016). For American participants, the concern about the behind-the-scenes interests and economic aspects of media conglomerates take the center stage.

In contrast, for Israeli participants the issues related to disadvantaged populations (e.g., children and the elderly) appear to be the most relevant for media literacy education. Although some ranking of the topics varied between the two groups of media scholars, the t-test analysis showed more similarities than differences. It can be the outcome of our purposeful sample of media scholars or the construct of the research tool. As we previously mentioned, we sampled Israeli and US media scholars who teach in the media studies departments of academic institutions.

Limitations and future studies

Due to the exploratory nature and the small size, as well as our subjectivity, the current project has a number of limitations. We restricted ourselves to 30 topics in order to have participants complete the survey in reasonable time. The wording of some of the topics was ambiguous and could affect the answers. By using the

ICA division of topics, we relied on the selection offered by this media studies community. Future research could explore topics prevalent in media literacy education by using such methodological tools as grounded theory. When formulating the topics for the survey, we started with the questions: What is media literacy? How can it be defied? When conducting future studies, researchers could also ask: What is *not* media literacy? This can allow them to include a broader range of topic in the sample and explore definitions of media literacy that they did not previously consider.

The question of nationality and cultural differences threaten the reliability and validity of our sample in case of the second research question about national comparison. As explained earlier, most of the Israeli media scholars completed their doctoral program in Communication at a US institution and then pursued an academic career in Israel. While we anonymized the responses, the sampling method suggests similar demographics for both the Israeli and US participants. The minor variance between Israeli and US media scholars suggests that future research can explore more diverse voices in media literacy education from other regions of the world to better answer the first research question regarding the ranking of media literacy topics.

Finally, it should be noted that our sample did not include K-12 teachers or librarians but rather media scholars who teach in communication departments, which created a bias in favor of a media effect and protectionist approach. Future studies can draw participants from practitioners, for example in schools, in order to overcome this limitation.

CONCLUSION

This research started when Ornat had to make sense of her students' confusion regarding a proper topic for a research paper in a media literacy class. Using the framework provided by the debate between Potter and Hobbs, we conclude that the vagueness of the definition is a core issue that reflects the current state of the field. The results of this study suggest that the perception of the 67 media scholars from our sample reflect not only the ambiguity of media literacy education, but also the continuing lack of one standard approach. Although the protectionist approach often shapes media literacy scholarship in higher education, empowerment strategies are often considered equally valid. One might see these disagreements as a strength of the field but there is also a reason to worry about the lack of coherence. We hope that our findings will encourage

further explorations of the field in order to support scholarship and educational practices that will allow the media literacy community to communicate a clear message about its core values as the developing media keep challenging our consumption and production practices.

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