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Media Literacy Education: Harnessing the Technological Imaginary

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As I see it, an important challenge for media literacy education in the next decade will be to cultivate a commanding voice in the cultural conversation about new and emerging communication media. To really have a stake in the social, economic and educational developments that emerge around new digital media in the U.S. and globally, media literacy educators need to be part of that larger conversation. Put another way, media literacy education is obligated to harness the technological imaginary and steer it in a productive direction. The technological imaginary consists of the myths, attitudes and values that a culture attaches to new technologies, sometimes in terms of their perceived abilities to fix what's wrong with society, and sometimes in terms of their perceived destruction of social cohesion (Lister et al. 2003). A less polemic view is that the technological imaginary is a cultural space for negotiating social issues (Marvin 1988). In other words, any number of concerns—about youth development, about the state of Democracy, about the direction of the economy, etc.—can be framed within a discussion about new technologies as cause, antidote or relevant player. Media literacy educators ought to be well-equipped and outspoken in the public negotiation of social and cultural issues attached to new and emerging media in the realms of education, commerce, information and policy. A widespread public influence can be achieved if media literacy educators set their focus in two areas: 1) emphasizing analysis of media technologies along with media content since the forms themselves shape not only content but also the very ways in which we organize our lives, and 2) understanding that the changes in media and communication rapidly taking place right now are part of a historic continuum of change and should be seen in that larger context.

The current technological imaginary surrounding digital media is evident not only in fictional narratives about powerful media and technologies found in television and film (*Eagle Eye*, *Wag the Dog*) or

advertising (ads for the Droid or the iPhone), but also in the discourses of those politicians, policy makers, educators, and employees within the traditional media industries who tend to focus on the ways in which emerging digital media practices via social networking and the Internet are undermining democracy, journalism, commerce, the needs and future abilities of children and youth, and so on. There is no doubt that purely fear-based dystopian and rosy utopian strands of the technological imaginary are simplistic, and almost never comprehensive or historically-based. But because communication technologies are so rapidly developing right now it seems reasonable that one-dimensional visions of future social interaction, of daily living, and of our vulnerabilities have surfaced in relation to digital communication. So media literacy educators must try to shape the technological imaginary in a reasoned, informed and very public way.

Analyzing Media Form and Content

The first line of focus should be emphasizing the need to analyse media forms and media content. I see movement away from purely content or message-based media literacy to a fuller understanding of the way media forms shape content and also shape the organization of our lives. For example, when cultivating a critical understanding of the ways in which advertising operates within the social sphere, obviously media literacy education must teach critical awareness of the pecuniary logic and methods of persuasion in advertising as a whole and within specific ad messages. It's also important to look at who is crafting the message and for whom. But it's every bit as important to look at the way a visual message differs from a text-based message, or how sound operates very differently as persuasion from the visual or textual. Furthermore, it is vital that advertising analysis take into account the kind of consumption environment that emerges when new frontiers of lived existence are tapped by advertisers who can reach

us at all times, and ever-more personally, via our mobile digital devices, often physically tracking us, targeting persuasive messages we're less and less able to escape.

It's the same with news. Media literacy educators must cultivate a critical understanding of the vast differences between visual and sound-based news on TV versus print-based news in newspapers, versus hyper-text news online that combines several forms at once while demanding greater interactivity. The emerging news literacy movement—populated by many who have a stake in defending traditional print and broadcast news outlets—tends to hone in on teaching young people to understand the difference between facts from reliable news outlets (trained journalists) and opinion found on the Internet. While this is one important component in critically confronting the genre, by itself it's too narrow. Digital media are changing the very definition of news, not just who is gathering and disseminating it. A wider recognition of news content and news form creates a larger, more relevant, discussion, and could facilitate folding the news literacy movement into the larger media literacy movement, making both stronger.

Historic Context of Media Development

The second line of focus for media literacy educators is cultivating an historic understanding of media development. Armed with an understanding of how the penny press newspapers, the telephone, photography, film, and radio waves of the nineteenth century, and television in the twentieth century, emerged and created some of the same public concerns and celebrations we confront today can help media literacy educators put current anxieties and attitudes into historic perspective. All of the aforementioned emerging media forms changed the genres and practices of their time because they created new ways to shape, disseminate and understand messages. And none of them emerged in a vacuum, outside the larger contexts of the economic, political and social exigencies of their day.

Take news, for example. Until mass production of newspapers met widespread urban development of the early nineteenth century Industrial Revolution and the necessity of advertiser underwriting, most newspapers were one person operations. News itself was a compilation of that person's subjective rendering of events and issues combined with other snippets of information. No doubt newspapers were powerful (the American Revolution owes a major debt to the early press), but the definition of news as "facts" and the idea

of objective reporting by trained journalists developed much later, in the mid-nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Fast forward to early radio news, which caused a panic within the newspaper industry because of real-time news reporting, then television news, starting in the 1950s and 1960s, where the combination of the visual medium and eventually satellite technology and the cable industry introduced a definition of news as that which is visually varied and dramatic (and necessarily produced around the clock). Each new medium ushered in a new era of journalism, requiring new ways of not only gathering and disseminating news, but also a re-thinking the very definition of news. We're experiencing another major journalistic shift right now.

Taking On the Technological Imaginary

The rapid switch to more digital, interactive media will drive media literacy education in the next decades because these emerging media allow greater participation and deeper interactivity. All of this has captured the attention of policy makers, educators and, of course, the media industry, and much of it is reactionary. The technological imaginary could completely run wild unless reigned in by media literacy educators who understand a larger context of media development, who can teach critical analysis of form and content, and can reach their educational constituents and a wider public. Media literacy educators need to look at the new shapes of commerce, education, and work and social life to see where they must not only shift their attention but also take a leadership position. I suggest that media literacy take its place on the public stage.

References

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