

Importance of creating a media literate society in the digital age

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Abstract: The increasing reliance of media on technology has profoundly impacted the way we make sense of the world around us and therefore it is increasingly becoming important to comprehend the way people analyze and interpret messages from mass media. This research studies the effect of technology on media literacy and deliberates on media policy making and the contribution of technology to the advancement of media literacy. The paper deliberates on the importance of media literacy in creating a knowledge-based society and discusses the attributes of media literate citizens. This study also contemplates on the factors that have a crucial role in the development of media literacy in educational institutions which includes making it an obligatory subject, employing media professionals to design and deliver its curriculums, conducting training programs for teachers to implement media literacy curriculum and involving not for profit organizations to support media literacy activities.

Keywords: mass media, technology, media education, media literacy, media policy.

Introduction

Today, the media play an effective role in the development of awareness of people and their decision-making, and as a subject becomes important for people, the more media are paid attention to (Soltanifar, M. and Bakhshi, B., 2010). The rapprochement in global culture challenges the foundations of education and changes the way we understand and make sense of the world around us. Now, it is not enough to read only the printed words; people need the ability to critically interpret and extract meaningful information from the images of prevailing multimedia culture. Media education provides a framework and strategies for the new literacy needed for 21st-century life, work, and citizenship. It also paves the way for mastering the skills needed for lifelong learning in an ever-changing world.

The idea of literacy, since the time of recorded history, has inevitably meant the ability to understand the jottings placed on slates or paper which forms the letters. When these letters were put together, they formed some sort of words that carry and convey some meaning. Teaching citizens to place the words together to understand and in turn, express ever more complex ideas became the aim and objective of education as it evolved over the centuries (Aqili and Nasiri, 2010). ("A National Priority for a Changing World") Communication in human beings is broadly understood with face-to-face messages by using verbal and nonverbal elements. The act of human communication began with a sender with a specific message that was transmitted, spoken, or written, later it was received by an individual. In ancient times people used to communicate in this way. Rural life on the farms and mountains was the only lifestyle that existed for people (DeFleur and Dennis Everette, 1994).

Modernization and innovative technology facilitated movement and information in communities. This innovation involved the development of transport, such as all-weather roads and canals. Years later, the creation of telegraphs and phones changed the way people communicated. The Industrial Revolution began in the 1900s and the methods of communication changed and made communication more advanced with the incorporation of newspapers, magazines, and radio (Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney, 1998).

When media literacy began in 1970, it was widely seen as a waste of time. When students need to learn basic subjects at school, why focus on advertising, television, and movies? "It is of utmost importance to comprehend the significance of mass media & literacy and to know about how the mass media functions in the industry and in our society." (Considine 2002, "Media Literacy: National Developments and International")

Mass media came to change the way people communicate in society. The newspaper changed the way people knew about the news. This medium became the main provider of vital information about political, social, and economical situations. Newspapers were also a local medium for audiences and advertisers. Magazines were incorporated into society in addition to the newspaper. Initially, this medium played a role in publishing general information on health, education, politics, economy, and sociology. Magazines like Forbes and Newsweek were a company with good editorials, so they changed the concept of magazines (Ibid., 185-190).

New images and sounds projected on the screen have been introduced on film and television. The film industry is now well established, and many companies have their theatres. The production and export of films to foreign countries is incredibly good business as is importing movies for viewing in the United States from other parts of the world. Over the years, television has been the main source of information and entertainment in all categories of programs: drama, comedy, suspense, and education. In addition, cable television created a revolution in broad electronic media. Due to the transmission of international programs, the mass media cable broadcasts a broader perspective on television. It has changed the way people watch television and it has helped society to become more culturally rich and have a broader perspective on the world.

Computers have also changed people's communication. Previously, people could only send messages from one place to another using telegraphs and letters. When computers and the internet became integrated, they replaced the older methods of communication with chats and modern-day e-mail. Nowadays, people know more about news, products, and services from the Internet. There are millions of web pages and sites that provide the public with all kinds of information.

Thanks to the multimedia culture, nowadays, we get information about the world through sounds and powerful images. From the radio clock that wakes us up in the morning, we are constantly exposed to thousands of images and ideas from television, websites, movies, radio, magazine covers, e-mail, video games, music, mobile phone messages, billboards, and more until we fall asleep in the night. It is rightly said that 'Media no longer just shape our culture—they are our culture' (Aqili and Nasiri, 2010).

As this mediated culture permeates social ecosystems, it articulates an audio-visual language that is quite complex and has its own set of principles regarding rules and regulations, grammar, and syntax. This complex dialect system communicates multi-layered ideas and concepts about the universe. "Not everything can be obvious at first, and the images pass so quickly! If our children will be able to navigate their lives through this multimedia culture, they need to be fluent in "reading" and "writing" the language of images and sounds just as we have always taught them to read and write the language of printed communications." ("A Rhetorical Approach to Assessing Source Credibility")

The Media Approach

Whether the idea is to influence policy and practice, justify public funding for their work, or tap further resources that may contribute to the research process, the importance and value of disseminating results to the widest possible audience are now universally recognized. That requires a communications approach and a carefully articulated media strategy that allows you to manage your relationship with the media's possible audience.

A strategy is a model or a detailed plan that combines objectives, policies, and operational chains of a news organization in the form of a coherent group. Using a strategy, we can define long-term information objectives.

Literacy and Technology in the New Age

With the new demands of the information age, teachers are now integrating technology across the curriculums. The traditional approach towards teaching involved the use of textbooks, lessons, numerous assignments and workbook pages, and writing that is understood only by the teacher. In this century, it is essential that children not only interact with their classmates and peers, but also read books online, use e-mail, skill themselves to find and review online information, prepare a presentation using software, and write for local as well as global audiences.

Educators and students in the new age classrooms respond positively to new technology tools. ePALS is an innovative resource that helps enhance literacy by providing students with safe email and easy-to-use tools. They can now communicate with their classmates and peers from around the globe, participate in different projects, create new friendships, and have the opportunity to understand different cultures. Digital magazines like Time for Kids Online, National Geographic, and OWL allow young learners to access information, read about current events and perspectives, play games and even submit articles for publication. Educators can also encourage reading and writing through some high-quality websites of literary sources such as Read-Write-Think; Puzzle maker, a repository of puzzles and platform for creating them, and Giggle Poetry, a publisher of children's poetry. Additional resources such as Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site, the Web Guide for Children's Literature, and the Children's Book Council facilitate reviews and activities for educators, thus helping improve literacy learning.

Technology further helps in improving literacy by enabling students to present and reconfigure information in diverse ways—such as visually and non-linearly (Smolin and Lawless 2003). Inspiration for software and online graphic organizers of the California school system are perfect examples of programs that facilitate such visual thinking. These new advanced tools help teachers and learners to deliberate concepts, organize the information, and share innovative ideas through Venn diagrams, charts, semantic webs, and other graphic images.

Also, teachers and children can now view stories through online videos, they can perform in a reader's theater, browse digital libraries, learn about authors, and access book talks. For standards-based, Web-delivered literature units, teachers may also view sites such as Cyber Guides.

India's first accredited online school, the K-8 classrooms, hugely impact literacy learning, as vast information is stored online. Due to this digital platform, students easily search for information or collect data online instead of preparing endless note cards in libraries. Popular search engines like Ask Jeeves for Kids, Kiddle, Yahoo!igans, and Kids Click are specifically designed for children.

Formerly, the children sought most of their information from parents and teachers; today, students spend twice as much time learning from media resources each year (Quesada and Summers 1998). ("Twenty-first Century Literacy and Technology in K-8 Classrooms") It is therefore imperative to train kids for searching and analyzing Web-based information for usefulness, objective, and accurate content. To check the messenger bias, students can now analyze links to and from selected websites. For example, children will be able to access AltaVista and enter "link:" in the search box followed by the URL. Thus, to verify bias at SeaWorld, learners would enter "link: <http://www.seaworld.org/>" and click the "find" icon to discover any bias or connections.

Additionally, by creating a Venn diagram, children will be able to compare information from different Web sites with online tools. "Today modern-day internet can either divulge factual and substantive information to the students or become "a gigantic electronic tabloid" ("twenty-first century literacy and technology in k-8 classrooms"). The proper use of technology enables teachers and learners with new ways to gain access, evaluate, and communicate information. According to Heath, S.B. (1991), the literacy community is now expanding to include a global community of children.

Media Literacy in the 21st Century

Media literacy is defined as how people analyze and interpret mass media messages. It is important to examine how people become literate in the media and the methodologies that can be used to make media education more effective. It is imperative to know and understand background information about people, exclusively their likes and dislikes about mass media, and to identify what makes them form literacy habits in the media.

In the past twenty years, media-centric education has come out to organize and promote the importance of teaching this broad concept of literacy. Priorly, media education was centered around teaching young kids about how the advertising works or the ways to analyze the primetime news telecast. But in her landmark book, "Literacy in a Digital World: Teaching and Learning in the Age of Information", Kathleen Tyner (1998) suggested that media education is more about education than about the media. For Tyner, media education "expands the literacy to incorporate reading and writing using new and emerging communication tools. It becomes imperative for critical, independent, and creative use of information in this learning process.

Today, the field has matured to a better understanding of its potential, not only as a new literacy but also as an engine to transform learning into a global multimedia environment. As noted by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2003), "Students are going to spend all their adult lives in a multi-tasking, multifaceted, technology-driven, diverse, vibrant world—and they must arrive equipped to do so" (p. 4). Media literacy, based on research-based, process-oriented pedagogy, offers not a new subject, but a new way of teaching and, more importantly, a new learning method.

Even today, but more so in the future, learning happens anywhere and everywhere, 24/7. It is increasingly most powerful through media and technology convergence. As per James Paul Gee (2003), an eminent literacy scholar, the fascination for video games should not be treated as mindless entertainment but should be looked upon as a complex learning experience, finely attuned to the learning and literacy of the modern world. In "What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy," Gee has underlined various learning principles that were built into good games. Gee further pointed out that video games are the forerunners of powerful instructional tools in the future, media, and technology.

While these new technologies promote participation and diversity of opinions. It also contributes to a stream of new challenges, such as unfiltered information, misinformation, copyright problems, and unhealthy user habits. Thus, there is an urgent need to promote media literacy in citizens to become consumers of critical information and effectively contribute to public discourse. With the development of media skills, citizens can better protect themselves from harmful content that is pushed by new information and communication technologies.

While new forms of literature are becoming part of this new media education, they are not necessarily recognized and promoted as essential to the prosperity of a society based on knowledge. Horton discusses six distinct categories of what he calls the "21st century survival literacies:" basic literacy skills, computer literacy, media literacy, distance education and e-learning, cultural literacy, and information literacy.

However, as traditional, and new media converge, the distinction between this literature is no longer clear. For example, media literacy is often confused with information literacy and is sometimes even used in the same sense. While information literacy focuses on technical skills to develop and distribute media, media literacy centers on citizen and cultural expression.

Yet, because of the growing media convergence, Horton points out that both literacies connect to issues of democracy and active citizenship and, therefore, should be merged to promote the role of citizenship and active participation more effectively.

Firestone also discusses crucial literacies in today's society such as media literacy, civic literacy, and news literacy—which he refers to as a "bundle of literacies." He addresses how these should be tied to the responsibility of citizenship, pointing out rightly, "We should have a right to be informed, but also a responsibility to become informed." He continues, "If we want to preserve a healthy democracy and society for future generations, we need to instill these literacies in our young as they assume the mantle of their highest calling, citizenship" (Martinsson, 2009).

Teaching Media Literacy to Students

Media messages are representations of reality, rather than reality itself, but they affect people in very real ways. To understand messages sent through media and their ultimate impact on society, students need to realize that media messages are created with a specific goal or purpose in mind. Each form of media, whether newspaper, television, or computer games, has its own unique "language" in which sounds, images, text, and movement are manipulated to create the message. When students understand who creates the media messages and how the messages are created, they are less susceptible to manipulation by the media and are better able to enjoy media and use it effectively. text and movement are manipulated to create the message.

As producers and consumers of media, students must select the media most appropriate for their specific needs. For example, some media may be effective for entertaining, but less suited for informing or persuading. Students need to understand the dynamic nature of media and the ways in which media change to adapt to the times so that they will be better able to select the media which suits their purpose most appropriately.

An effective way for students to understand how media messages are created is to design and create their own media messages. While available equipment may vary from school to school, all students can learn to select appropriate media to convey specific messages to specific audiences. They need to understand the techniques and strategies necessary to create effective media messages and how to apply those strategies to their own productions. Equally important, they develop skills to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the strategies selected and adjust for future productions.

Students need to understand the impact that media of all kinds have on our society. They must analyze the media to determine the point of view embedded in messages and the accuracy of the message. They must actively evaluate the influence that media have on behaviors, values, and democracy and learn to use media in legal and ethical ways.

Characteristics of Media Literate People

Media-literate people understand that media is designed to convey ideas, information, and news from someone else's point of view. They understand that emotional effects are used to create specific techniques. They can identify these techniques and their intended and actual effects. They know that the media is good for some people, but they leave others out. They will be able to ask and sometimes answer questions about who benefits, who is left out, and why. Media literate people seek other sources of information and entertainment. Media literate people use the media for their own advantages and enjoyment. Media literate folks know how to

act rather than be acted on. In this way, media literate people are better citizens.

Conclusion

Today literacy means more than reading and writing. Therefore, to be functionally literate in this media-centric world, we should be able to read the messages that daily inform us, entertain us, and sell to us. As the Internet becomes an inseparable part of life, critical thinking skills are more important to help young people navigate through the traditional media.

Through an extensive study on media literacy, we can conclude the focal areas that may play a key role in the successful development and advancement of media literacy in schools. First, media literacy, like any other initiative activity, should be considered a fundamental movement and it is necessary for education and media professionals to be initiative to defend this movement. Secondly, the authorities should make academic education in media studies obligatory in curriculums of schools and show clear support for this program and the Institute of Education should hire professionals for the training of future teachers in the field of media.

In addition, supplementary training should be provided to teachers in schools in this field to improve the implementation of media training programs. Schools may also be needing media consultant experts in the field of media literacy who could provide a communication network. Appropriate textbooks and audiovisual resources should be provided in school curriculums.

To support workshops, conferences, publishing newsletters, and creating curriculum units, some NGOs and communities should be encouraged. Such professional organizations must hire people interested in the field of media literacy. Media literacy workshops for parents and other stakeholders need to be encouraged to engage them in this field.

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