

## The Myth of Media Literacy

ZOË DRUICK<sup>1</sup>

Simon Fraser University, Canada

Since the late 1990s, media literacy has become an increasingly prominent paradigm within the fields of media and communication studies in the United States and elsewhere. This article investigates the convergence of forces in that propelled this approach to its currently ascendant position. With a nod to Harvey J. Graff's analysis of the mythic power associated with the concept of literacy, the article explores the techniques and rationales that have coalesced around media literacy, making it at once central to the operation of neoliberal capitalism and to its critique. Putting media literacy into a longer history of the instrumental and biopolitical use of media in education and considering the role of education in connecting children's interests to moral and economic regulation, media literacy is taken to be the most recent iteration of a long-standing set of ideas that have been taken up in different ways by early educational reformers, postwar development communications theorists, and countercultural media educators.

*Keywords: media literacy, myth of literacy, neoliberalism, education, development media*

In March 1998, the *Journal of Communication* published an issue entirely devoted to the topic of media literacy. In his introduction, the journal's editor, Alan Rubin, observed that, although the topic had been debated for "several decades . . . it is somewhat perplexing why we really understand so little about the subject" (Rubin, 1998, p. 3). In retrospect, this may have marked the arrival of a suggestive but imprecise concept into the mainstream of American communication studies. But by this point it had already received a good deal of play in educational policy and practice in a range of national and transnational contexts. The widespread deregulation of the media in the 1980s, the emergence of postcommunist states in the early 1990s, and the aggressive promotion of both globalized free trade and the digital economy that ensued led to the centering of media education in democratic discourse by various strange bedfellows. At about the same time, left-wing educators and media reformers began to consolidate the political work done with film and video in the 1970s on the new digital platform; USAID began an aggressive media campaign in the former Eastern Bloc under the rubrics of the National

---

Zoë Druick: [druick@sfu.ca](mailto:druick@sfu.ca)

Date submitted: 2015-07-18

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge Vitor Borba, Harvey J. Graff, Jerry Zazlove, and Yuezhi Zhao for their support of this research.

Copyright © 2016 (Zoë Druick). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

Endowment for Democracy and the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA); and large corporations began funding digital literacy initiatives, as did the MacArthur Foundation.

All these groups rallied around the creation of critical capacities in media users and the potentials of participatory media for democratic citizenship; significantly, each of them used the same rubric despite their sometimes polarized political views. In fact, only two years after the *Journal of Communication* issue, a rift appeared in the provisional networks that had sprung up in the media literacy community stemming from disagreements over whether to accept funding from media industries and about the importance of centering activism in their program. Where some saw media literacy as a critique of capitalism and the embrace of active learning, others saw it as a replacement for censorship or regulation, or even as the promotion of “tool competence,” an uncritical notion of technology as merely knobs and levers (Hobbs, 1998; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009).

Split notwithstanding, in the new millennium, media literacy has become an important new paradigm, and shelves of textbooks have been produced on media literacy and related concepts, including digital literacy, visual literacy, and multimedia and multimodal literacies (e.g., Burn & Durran, 2007; Elkins, 2008; Hobbs & Moore, 2013; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kist, 2005; Potter, 2011; Rivoltella, 2008; Tyner, 2010; Williams & Zenger, 2012).<sup>2</sup> Educator networks and political organizations, such as the American Centre for Media Literacy and the National Association for Media Literacy Education, have mushroomed under this banner as well. But in the rush to adopt and apply this set of educational ideas about the digital society, a telling set of contradictions has emerged that seems worthy of analysis. From progressive media reformers and youth-centered educators to large media corporations and American soft power peddlers, there appears to be a place for everyone in this particular tent. Granted, youth are commonly the focus of educational ontologies in democratic polities, and the politics of education are lost on no one. Yet media literacy seemingly can be stretched to encompass everything from children’s understanding of conventions of realism and new forms of sociality to the revitalization of participatory democracy and lifelong learning and retraining according to labor market needs in the digital economy.<sup>3</sup> It is almost as though media literacy has become shorthand for the challenges and logics of neoliberal social and economic organization.

For decades, the critical study of media had its strongest proponents in nations somewhat reluctantly receiving American media. For instance, media education has a long tradition in the United Kingdom and other Commonwealth nations, stretching back to the founding of the BBC in 1922 and the British Film Institute in 1933, as well as the establishment of the documentary movement, through to British Cultural Studies of the Birmingham School. However, by 2003, when the new Communications Act

---

<sup>2</sup> Although precise data are not available, judging solely by the number of textbooks (more than 100 cataloged with the keyword of *media literacy* in my midsize university library), it is safe to assume that courses on media literacy in high schools as well as in departments of education, English, and communication studies at university and college levels are being mounted in increasing numbers.

<sup>3</sup> Lifelong learning, which has been organized around new technologies, is also subject to an analysis of governmentality and biopower. It is outside the scope of this article, but see Olssen (2006).

delegated the duty of promoting media literacy in the United Kingdom to the newly formed Office of Communication, it adopted a definition devised in the United States in 1992 (the "Aspen declaration"): "the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes" (Firestone, 1993, p. v; see also Buckingham, 2005). Following the United Kingdom's lead, the European Commission took a position in 2006 that media literacy was central to "active and full citizenship" (Sourbati, 2009, p. 248). Today, the articulation of media literacy with democratic citizenship has become something of a truism in education and communication policy and practice worldwide (Hermes, van den Berg, & Mol, 2013; Penman & Turnbull, 2007).

Yet the simplicity and practicality that emerged with the Americanization of the field has had a number of ramifications. Unlike earlier media studies paradigms, media literacy tends to mix well with the media effects tradition so long favored in the United States. Key areas of intervention around media violence, sexual content, health, stereotypes, and the production of fear also further the effects tradition (Potter, 2013). Observing that the movement took on momentum after the Columbine shootings of 1999, film scholar Jim Wehmeyer (2000) observed of the media literacy community in the United States that

many of this movement's central theoretical concerns and operative assumptions echo and provide a contemporary forum for the primarily psychologically and biologically informed threads of mass communication theory and research that so dominated U.S. academic understanding of media, society, and culture in the mid-twentieth century. (p. 94)

In this essay, I make a preliminary sketch of the career of the American discourse of media literacy, including its roots in development discourse, to situate the "conceptually diffuse and politically disorganized" (Cowie, 2000, p. 312) movement of today. From the outset, media literacy's connection to both education and media, and its provocative associations with children, youth, and powers of influence, has attracted reformers and regulators from across the political spectrum, making it a symptomatic term for tracing the history of a governmental discourse central to discussions of media and modern education. Yet its emergence alongside the neoliberalization of Western states merits particular attention.

Although it is not my intention to overfetishize the concept of literacy, I will argue that the consensus that has grown up around this framework for media analysis does have particular significance. In his in-depth analysis of the "myth of literacy," historian Harvey J. Graff astutely identifies literacy as more than a set of skills or an orientation to the world; rather, it is a compelling and contradictory social symbol that has been articulated to every aspect of social improvement, from citizenship and civility to higher forms of thought, improved health, and even class mobility (Graff, 1979, 1987). Graff's incisive point is that literacy has been isolated from a constellation of social, political, and economic practices precisely because, when reduced to a set of skills, it is something that can be affected by the school system, one of the most powerful and far-reaching social institutions of modern societies. Outcomes can be measured and a wide array of objectives sought after, if never actually met. Far from a simple objective, then, one might say that literacy represents a powerful and discourse-generating problematic (see Hermes et al., 2013). In Foucauldian terms, literacies can be seen as techniques of biopower, or the

“controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomenon of population to economic processes” (Foucault, 1980, p. 141).

As a fundamental skill that promises to promote improvement in so many ways, literacy seems immune to opposition, and media literacy is no exception. For this reason, groups of every imaginable political affiliation have rallied to its flag. In this article, I trace the history of the establishment of the American concept of media literacy with the kind of attention that Graff pays to its panacea-like qualities. By now it has become, for better or worse, associated with the promises and perils of employment and success in the information age, the operation of digital democracy, and, most recently, the growth of the creative economy. Rather than inventory its successes and failures, I map its dimensions and contours, its techniques and rationales, with the objective of understanding its growing place in the study of media.

To do justice to this idea, which emerged long before its legitimation in the late 1990s, it is instructive to consider the history of media and education, from film in the classroom—a technique that goes back to the earliest decades of cinema—to the consolidation of media’s role in education in the postwar world, led by agencies such as UNESCO, and the establishment of the field of development communications. The 1950s and 1960s, in particular, were decades of consolidation for a range of educational media service providers, generously funded by American industrial and philanthropic organizations, such as the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, as well as the U.S. state (Simpson, 1994). The approach of these agencies to finding ways to combine media and education provides an important backdrop for understanding the current emphasis on media literacy.

Like Graff, I use the term *myth* advisedly, not to refer to a falsehood but rather to invoke the anthropology-indebted traditions in cultural studies that situate myths as central social narratives (Barthes, 1972). Graff advocates the use of historical and empirical study to complicate the universal claims made for literacy. If he has shown that there are delusions of grandeur surrounding literacy, I argue that, with reference to media literacy, these delusions become scaled up to the core fantasies of neoliberalism with its promises of democracy through participation in the social networks of what political theorist Jodi Dean (2009) terms “communicative capitalism.” As with all modern educational initiatives, media literacy is marked by the governmental qualities endemic to biopolitical projects (Hardt & Negri, 2004; Hunter, 1988). As I hope to show, media education and media literacy have had many different valences over the past century, but as they become more firmly ensconced in social, political, and economic institutions of the neoliberal era, they have more clearly adopted discourses that tend to emphasize neutral methodology and downplay politics, evoking democracy while simultaneously smoothing out the conflicts and contradictions that the term all too clearly evokes. I will therefore explore the way in which media literacy discourse has been absorbed into corporate discourses of neoliberal citizenship in ways that resonate with Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) analysis of the anti-authoritarian capitalism that has evolved since May 1968 and as part of the technology sector’s utopian capitalism (Turner, 2006). I will take as the basis for my analysis of new common sense in media literacy two MacArthur Foundation-funded studies from 2009, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, and *Living and Learning With New Media*.

### The Literate and Illiterate

To bring some context to the current use of the term *media literacy*, examination of the history of media in education might be illuminating. To that end, I offer a brief sketch of the use of technologies in the classroom and the pedagogical expectations that accompanied them. Silent film was the first industrial visual technology to make its way into the classroom, emerging in educational settings, both formal and informal, in the late 1890s, almost as soon as the technologies were commercially available. It was not long before these local and national initiatives, by churches, schools, libraries, and YMCAs, were scaled up to international agencies, such as the League of Nations' International Educational Cinematograph Institute, one of the precursors of UNESCO (Druick, 2007).

The United States is well known as a producer of popular media entertainment, but its role in the promotion of media education is just as impressive. As far back as the silent film era, U.S. corporations and philanthropic organizations were keen to become part of classrooms. After 1923, the year that Kodak released its noninflammable 16mm format and began to steal market dominance away from the French company Pathé, American educators were able to assemble a powerful network of individuals, institutions, and philanthropic organizations, including journals such as *Moving Picture Age* and *Visual Education*, that focused on the use of film in the classroom (Greene, 2005; Orgeron, Orgeron, & Streible, 2012; Saettler, 1968; Wasson, 2005).

One of the characteristics of the current discourse of media literacy is its focus on intensification of media experiences for youth on digital platforms and the presumed dangers of illiteracy. Education's twin goals of subjectivization and modernization have long relied on the specter of the illiterate as its unschooled other (Hunter, 1988). Often, discourses of illiteracy have been tied to colonial relations. As late as the 1970s, one could still encounter a story in a communication textbook about the surprise of African viewers when seeing a chicken run across a movie screen or of Pacific Islanders unable to recognize themselves in a film (Carpenter, 1973). This colonial orientation is part and parcel of communication as a social science bound up with modernity and imperialism (Alhassan, 2007). As historian James M. Burns (2002) notes, from the silent period onward, the capacity to comprehend films was one of a "cluster of skills and abilities" that allowed settlers to claim superiority over "natives" (p. 35; see also Wilson, 1961). Thus, racist discourses of Africans' backwardness, childishness, and impressionability, for instance, were bolstered by a "colonial folklore" that aimed to establish differences between colonizers and colonized. In fact, ever since audiences were supposed to have jumped up from their seats when the Lumières' train pulled into the station on movie screens in 1896, comprehension of new media has been linked to modernity and often used to reinforce colonial and class hierarchies. As with many of the claims of media illiteracy, the panicking audience story is a fable of industrial society (Bottomore, 1999; Gunning, 1989). What is significant for our purposes here, however, is the way in which the myth of media literacy, the ability to "read and write" with new media, has tended to be associated with progressive and modern values.

In no less important ways, media were often used in classrooms to create efficiencies. The demands universal education was placing on education systems in the postwar industrial world required changes to thinking about how curriculum could be delivered; one answer to the resource conundrum was

the invention of various “teaching machines.” In his history of classroom uses of technology, Larry Cuban (1986) notes that the dream of efficiency in education manifested itself as the Taylorization of the classroom, in which the integration of the student into mechanized feedback loops was hoped to increase speed and standardization. The concept of teaching machines took on prominence in the decades following the Second World War; television was a reformer’s holy grail. In 1958, for instance, behavioral scientist B. F. Skinner published an article on teaching machines in *Science*, in which he characterized educational technology as the best way to meet the demands on educational systems:

There are more people in the world than ever before, and a far greater part of them want an education. The demand cannot be met simply by building more schools and training more teachers. Education must become more efficient. To this end, curricula must be revised and simplified, and textbooks and classroom techniques improved. In any other field a demand for increased production would have led at once to the invention of labor-saving capital equipment. Education has reached this stage very late, possibly through a misconception of its task. Thanks to the advent of television, however, the so-called audio-visual aids are being re-examined. Film projectors, television sets, phonographs, and tape recorders are finding their way into American schools and colleges. (Skinner, 1958, p. 969)

The Ford Foundation entered the educational field in the early 1950s through the establishment of its Funds for the Advancement of Education. As an extension of this mandate, in the 1950s and 1960s, the foundation provided funding to the National Association of Educational Broadcasters for experimental projects using TV in schools, including a futuristic airborne regional educational broadcasting scheme in the American Midwest and a satellite instructional television experiment in India (Goldfarb, 2002; Perlman, 2010; see also Lindo-Fuentes & Ching, 2012). In all these cases, technology in general, and television in particular, was presented as a solution to a pressing educational “state of emergency” (Lewis, 2007, p. 689).

Around this time, ideas about the use of technology for education made their way from American theorists to UNESCO’s projects in the developing world. In UNESCO publications and conferences of the 1950s, the humanist ideals of peace and freedom were translated into matters of technique. When connected with behaviorist theories of education that dominated American psychology, UNESCO’s work with media, especially in the global South, mapped a project of centralization and standardization onto the project of liberal education that dominated modernization theory for the better part of two decades (Druick, 2011).

Development communication guru Wilbur Schramm, for instance, was a strong proponent of educational media in developing countries and spearheaded several UNESCO projects, whose outcomes were published in his many books, including *The New Media: Memo to Educational Planners* (1967b) and the three-volume *New Educational Media in Action: Case Studies for Planners* (1967a). With McLuhanesque enthusiasm, he noted in this USAID-funded study that “new media” of instruction place a

machine or other electronic device in the communication process in such a way as to extend a student's sight and hearing through space and time so that he can actually see and hear the teacher or what the teacher wants to show him. In a still newer generation of teaching devices . . . the student actually uses a responsive machine—a teaching machine . . . —and practices by communicating back and forth with it. (Schramm & International Institute for Educational Planning, 1967b, p. 13, fn 1)

The most extreme example of the theory behind teaching machines being put into practice took place in U.S.-controlled Samoa, where, between 1964 and 1975, an entire primary school curriculum was organized around television (Schramm, Nelson, & Betham, 1981). In his study of media education, *Visual Pedagogy*, Brian Goldfarb demonstrates the colonial logic of teaching machines, describing how the United States began experimenting with technological education in low-income schools in mainland United States and in the territory of American Samoa at the same time. Significantly, these projects emphasized differential forms of learning for different types of learners. In Samoa, for instance, the one school geared to college-bound U.S. mainland citizens was exempt from the program (Goldfarb, 2002). Despite the current mania for integrating new media into classrooms, then, history has shown that often the more mechanized a classroom, the lower the scholastic expectations.<sup>4</sup>

### Critical Media Studies as Inoculation

The connection of postwar media theory to educational imperatives such as standardized testing and automation is an essential aspect of the story of media literacy—if only for providing the state of affairs to which critical media studies responded. In particular, the development of critical media and cultural studies by the likes of Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall in the United Kingdom were tied to educational projects. Williams and Hall were actively committed to the field of adult education; the political perspectives of communication studies as articulated in a work such as Williams' *Communications* (1962), which was commissioned by the United Kingdom's National Union of Teachers, was largely derived from his work over the previous 15 years in adult education (Workers' Educational Association and university extension) (Dworkin, 1997; Williams, 2007).<sup>5</sup>

The critical media and cultural studies tradition in Britain considered issues of dominant media and their relation to political economy and social inequality, an analysis that was meant as a preamble to the struggle for social justice. Interestingly, just as universal education of the 19th century sought to improve cultural tastes, postwar critical and "environmental" (McLuhanesque) approaches to media study

---

<sup>4</sup> Debunking the idea that technology alone will produce social mobility, Silicon Valley computer engineering families are reportedly sending their children to tech-free Waldorf schools (Richtel, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Williams and Hall followed in the footsteps of Richard Hoggart, founder of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, who had written about media and literacy, though not in the same phrase, in his 1957 dirge about the working-class consumption of mass-produced culture, *The Uses of Literacy* (Hoggart, 1957).

drew on traditions of education as inoculation against media's deleterious effects (Hunter, 1988).<sup>6</sup> Yet despite, or perhaps because of, their critical perspectives, ideas about the media produced by social analysts were eagerly sought after by educational institutions and corporate interests involved in the development of global economies (Turner, 2006). To be sure, the movement of ideas about media studies and later media literacy into mainstream institutions of social reproduction such as the educational system did not occur without friction and modification. But it would be incorrect to assume that education and media typically have been at loggerheads. In the remainder of this essay, I sketch out these connections to bring greater clarity to the increasing prominence of the media literacy paradigm in educational discourse in general and higher education in particular.

### **Media Literacy and (Anti)capitalism**

Even if most of the educational television projects were declared failures by the 1970s, technology and the classroom were by then well bonded. Cultural critics who had formerly adopted the inoculation approach now began to be interested in the potentials of media for art and education, the "creative media approach" (Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012, p. 146). Following Freire's ideas about pedagogy for liberation as well as McLuhan's ideas about media as human "extenders" made popular by *Understanding Media* (McLuhan, 1964), production began to take the place of critical reception as the appropriate mode of using media in the classroom (Cowie, 2000; Shor & Friere, 1987). Not only did it have exemplary ability to engage students, but in one fell swoop it would help to demystify mainstream media and possibly liberate young minds from corporate culture. As Renee Hobbs and Amy Jensen (2009) put it, "During the 1970s, media literacy education began to be recognized as a critical practice of citizenship, part of the exercise of democratic rights and civil responsibilities" (p. 3).

Media education of the 1970s and 1980s was organized primarily around the study of television. For Len Masterman, one of the most influential media educators of the period, the simple act of bringing media into the classroom was a way of decentering knowledge and opening up the "potential for genuine dialogue." Moreover, Masterman (1997) asserted that the imaginative and investigative approach of media studies was "light years ahead of the content-bound syllabuses of most traditional subjects" (p. 49). Masterman was highly pragmatic: If media studies could be accepted as a subject in high schools, with dedicated instructors, it would develop enough institutional legitimacy, he thought, to enable it to create its own associations and journals. Arguably, it was precisely this move from a media studies on the margins to the educational legitimacy and institutionalization that would pave the way for new policies concerning media literacy later in the decade.

Yet, as media education became a part of K-12 school curricula—albeit unevenly and with a certain amount of resistance from "back to basics" conservatives—the critical, political agenda was often

---

<sup>6</sup> Although outside the scope of this essay, it bears noting that Marshall McLuhan's preliminary work for his book *Understanding Media* was undertaken for a Ford Foundation-funded study on behalf of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters on teaching with new media. In his 1960 report, McLuhan worked out some of the preliminary ideas that would be elaborated in his best-selling book *Understanding Media* four years later (McLuhan, 1960, 1964).



softened and simplified to achieve the kind of instrumentality evident in the Aspen declaration of 1992. As media education guru David Buckingham (2003) put it,

Media education is proposed as a way of dealing with some very wide and complex social problems—and if the media are routinely identified as the overriding cause of these problems, media education frequently seems to be seen as the solution. (p. 11)

Just as the study of propaganda during the Second World War was transformed into the euphemism of “communication” as it developed into an academic discipline in the postwar world (Simpson, 1994), so, too, critiques of the media undertaken by 1960s social movement actors and radical adult educators were taken up and changed by educational institutions in the 1990s under the banner of “media literacy.” As an example of the gross simplification this shift entailed, by 2003, the American Center for Media Literacy had released a “MediaLit Kit” that boiled the study of media down to five core concepts and five key questions (Thoman & Jolls, 2003).

### **Neoliberalism and the Fast Policy of Media Literacy**

Given its connection to a countercultural ethos steeped in the New Left’s foundational belief in participatory democracy, it seems surprising, perhaps, that the new paradigm of media literacy fit so well with the emerging doctrine of neoliberalism. Yet, as several studies have convincingly demonstrated, neoliberalism built its legitimacy precisely on the critique of authority and repressive paternalism made by social movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Fraser, 2009; Hallin, 2008; Turner, 2006). Critiques of the mainstream media, like certain aspects of feminism, were readily adopted into mainstream culture (including advertising), while substantive social critiques, especially about economic redistribution and environmental and social justice, were largely brushed aside.

The various dead ends of television in the classroom were overcome by the structural emergence of digital in the mid-1990s, which corresponded to the dismantling of the welfare state and the deregulation of the media industries in many parts of the world in the 1980s and 1990s. By the end of the 1990s, notes Brian Goldfarb (2002), “information technology was transformed from a useful resource to the key to literacy and, indeed, to success in the ‘knowledge- and information-driven economy’” (pp. 7–8).

Paradoxically, once media studies, long derided by the right as at once too amorphous and too political, had been transformed into the more neutral-sounding promotion of media *literacy*, it was easily mobilized by a corporate political agenda of extending democracy around the world (Cowie, 2000). Like the creative city, media literacy was adopted into what Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore (2015) call “fast policy” spreading across the global North in the last decade of the millennium. The Scandinavian countries embraced media literacy in the 1990s, as did Australia, Scotland, and Canada, small English-speaking nations used to grappling with foreign-produced media. Racially divided societies such as Israel and South Africa turned to media literacy in the 1990s as a cure “for every social ill” (Lemish & Lemish, 1997, p. 222).

But all these initiatives paled beside those undertaken by the U.S. government and related organizations. For instance, the United States amped up its soft power campaigns for media literacy at precisely the moment when it was pushing for globalization through powerful international agencies such as the World Bank and World Trade Organization. Funded through California's Center for Civic Education, Civitas, an international educational exchange program with an emphasis on emerging democracies in Eastern Europe, grew throughout the 1990s. (Civitas partnerships have been established between and among 30 U.S. states and 26 countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America.) Involved organizations included the American Federation of Teachers, the American Political Science Association, and the Center for Civic Education (<http://new.civiced.org/>). Although the themes vary, in 1995, Civitas hosted a "democracy camp" on media literacy, where "the need for citizens living in democracies to become discriminating, media-literate consumers was a crucial theme that permeated the readings, lectures and discussions" (Burroughs, Brocato, Hopper, & Sanders, 2009, pp. 157–158).

Another example is the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), a project of the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy that was founded in 2006 to spread the values of democratic media abroad and has been a strong proponent of media literacy. In 2009, CIMA released a report on media literacy by Paul Mihailidis, a journalism professor at Hofstra University and member of the board of directors of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. The report, titled *Empowering Youth Worldwide*, aptly observes:

Few would argue with the need to offer youth effective educational platforms to help them understand the role of information in an increasingly hyper media age. . . . Supporting media literacy education for youth can help prepare children and young adults for lives of active inquiry around media and for a better understanding of ties between information, community, and democracy. (2009, p. 4)<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, these were sentiments that could not be opposed.

Ironically, the Freirian critique of the banking model of education resonated with the emphasis on processing rather than knowledge that was deemed essential to an information economy. Disney, Verizon, Dell, Apple, Microsoft, Bell, and YouTube all began to generously support digital learning initiatives (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Peters, 1998), indicating just how valuable this individuated approach to media education could be. Whereas liberal educators tended to see media critique as a form of consciousness raising and radical democratic practice, corporations approached the teaching of media "reading" skills as the development of a requisite competency for the neoliberal vision of the creative economy made up of atomized consumer-producers.

The commodification of community through corporate social media and multiplayer games, and the injunctions to re-edit and remix that subsequently became ubiquitous in digital culture, created

---

<sup>7</sup> A follow-up report, *Media Literacy 2.0: A Sampling of Programs Around the World* (Burgess, 2013), was released in November 2013. Other reports include *Media Literacy: Citizen Journalists* (Moeller, 2009a) and *Media Literacy: Understanding the News* (Moeller, 2009b).

innovative new forms of profit extraction from viewers and readers (transformed into “prosumer content-makers”) in what Jodi Dean (2009) calls the system of “communicative capital” (see also Andrejevic, 2008). In this context, media literacy has been readily adopted as the correct—meaning legal, but also culturally endorsed—use of new media technologies, which fits well within the paradigm of neoliberal citizenship. Perhaps most insidiously, media literacy as a discourse of citizenship enables technological exclusion to become the most salient social issue. This corresponds to Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) identification of “exclusion” as the dominant form of social inequality in network capitalism. The conjoining of technology to literacy and thence to citizenship makes technology into the overriding prerequisite of citizenship and confirms a political and economic agenda predicated on unquestioned tropes of technological progress and individual self-responsibilization.

Did capitalist and imperialist forces steal the idea of media literacy? It is no doubt true, as Raymond Williams documents with literary studies, that, as new disciplines become legitimized, their original political objectives are frequently sidelined. However, media literacy certainly did not begin with the counterculture. In fact, as I have traced here, capitalist interests have long aimed to use media to train students as well as consumers. Media companies have aggressively sought out the classroom, and untold numbers of teachers have taken it as their challenge to meet children halfway by studying industrially produced culture, or by using popular cultural forms as a means for “supervised freedom” (Hunter, 1988, p. 58). Indeed, media education has long been associated with (neo)colonial educational projects that sought efficiencies for teaching children (and adults) for whom the system holds lower expectations. In short, media literacy of all stripes continues the long-standing governmental practice of braiding education together with technologies of moral and civic improvement. With globalization and the development of the digital economy, media literacy, with its antiauthority patina, must have seemed tailor-made as the ideal technique for managing youth, connecting their relationship as consumers of media with the need for them to be formed into compliant yet entrepreneurial citizens.

### **Two Studies: *Living and Learning With New Media* and *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture***

In 2006, the MacArthur Foundation allocated \$50 million to its “digital media and learning” initiative “to help determine how digital technologies are changing the way young people learn, play, socialize, and participate in civic life” ([digitalllearning.macfound.org](http://digitalllearning.macfound.org)). As part of this initiative, two multiauthored academic studies on youth and digital culture were published: one led by cultural anthropologist Mizuko Ito and the other by communications scholar Henry Jenkins. In both studies, the concepts of media and digital literacies figure prominently.

The study by Ito et al. (2009) is comprised of 28 ethnographic studies of youth and media and considers the contexts in which youth use new media networks for socializing and learning. The authors pay particular attention to the difference between adult and youth conceptions and knowledge about new media and the lag between schools and everyday technology use. The project maps out teenage uses of new media and then interprets them through “four key analytic foci” (p. 13): participation, publics, literacy, and learning. For the purposes of this discussion, I will focus on the analysis of media literacy

that the study engages. Ito and the other authors demonstrate their sensitivity to definitions of literacy that emphasize its situatedness and embedding in relations of power.

In our work, we suggest that not only are new media practices defining forms of literacy that rely on interactive and multimedia forms but they also are defining literacies that are specific to a particular media moment, and possibly generational identities. (Ito et al., 2009, p. 26)

While identifying youth practices online as literacy throughout the study, the authors advocate for adults to recognize youth's activities as meaningful, demonstrating that there is a generational rift in definitions of literacy and its value.

The study by Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robison (2009) takes a more explicitly normative approach to digital technologies in the classroom and identifies 11 core skills "that all youth need to learn if they are going to be equal participants in the world of tomorrow" (p. 21), including play, simulation, performance, appropriation, multitasking, judgment, networking, and transmedia navigation. Using existing innovations in the K–12 classroom as models, the report suggests that there could be a more "systematic consideration" of the development of these skills in the curriculum. "We do not want to see media literacy treated as an add-on subject," write the authors. "Rather, its introduction should be a paradigm shift that, like multiculturalism or globalization, reshapes how we teach every existing subject" (p. 109).

Taken together, the two studies provide a useful snapshot of the consolidation of new media literacy discourse in the early 2000s. In some ways reminiscent of television and video literacy projects of the 1970s and 1980s, Ito et al.'s study adopts a cultural studies approach to the existing media practices of youth that refuses to judge their practices, seeing in them new forms of sociality and engagement that adults should presumably strive to understand and marshal in positive directions rather than ignore or attempt to destroy. Jenkins et al.'s study extends this approach by making suggestions about how K–12 classrooms could incorporate some of youth's own new media literacies. Both agree that youth practices should be understood and combined with more institutional forms of learning to create the participatory digital publics of tomorrow. The studies are designed to help adults who work with youth to both understand digital platforms and improve their skills and practices. The virtues of enhancing publics and the values of participation are taken to be tacit. But the digital divide stands in as the only reference to social and economic inequalities; and unlike other kinds of inequality, this one has a built-in solution. As with Graff's analysis of the myth of literacy, media literacy is presented as a social panacea that gives focus to curricula and becomes a goal to be striven for, if never fully achieved.

Several educational theorists have connected new educational initiatives—such as lifelong learning—to the governmental and biopolitical projects of neoliberalism (e.g., Gillies, 2008; Lewis, 2007; Olssen, 2006; Simons, 2006). The significance of this perspective is that it considers that utopian visions of education are not realized against biopower so much as through it. For instance, Dewey's mandate against the wasting of a child's life—though progressive—is biopolitical through and through (Lewis, 2007). In this way, Foucault's notion of biopower can be seen to encompass governmental projects of

many political persuasions. Neoliberalism's emphasis on the efficient training and operation of entrepreneurial subjects allows for diverse practices of freedom as long as the competitive logic of the marketplace prevails (Foucault, 2008; Simons, 2006). The emphasis in the recent McArthur Foundation-funded reports on the successful operation of youth in the digital realm is not situated in any kind of opposition to capitalist relations. On the contrary, ensuring the efficient operation of critical, competitive, individualized subjectivities can help to shore up capitalist values. Further, their call for parents and educational institutions to facilitate and enhance youth's digital practices and literacies presents those who do not as backward thinking (possibly digitally illiterate) and therefore by definition neither modern nor progressive. In this perspective, the fostering of media literacy is tantamount to the cultivation of youth's "human capital," something that neoliberal regimes demand of both parents and schools (Foucault, 2008).

Although articulated in new ways, I argue that these discussions bear a genealogical connection to the history of technologized education. Not only do they translate youth practices into the language of literacy, thereby mobilizing the positive values associated with the term that Graff describes, they also consider ways that scholastic practices could be brought closer to the market-based technologies, platforms, and practices available to youth today. They normalize and endorse technology-based modes of relating and learning and suggest practices to enhance the individualized subjectivities that are shaped through them with democratic values of participation and inclusion. In short, these studies demonstrate the consonance of education with mediated subjectivities and reinforce the need for teachers and parents to catch up with youth in the technocapitalist marketplace.

### Conclusion

In this essay, I have teased apart the multiple tensions and contradictions present in current media literacy discourse. The term *media literacy* refers as easily to learning about the formal aspects of the media as it does to claims about the risk society, citizenship, and even democratic revitalization (Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2013). In my view, this slippery-ness cannot be avoided simply through the use of clearer distinctions (such as critical versus top-down media literacy), because the myth of media literacy clearly cuts across political lines, and in some ways is fundamental to the practice of all media-based pedagogy. As both threat and promise, new media have been a central object of attention and concern for teachers and administrators for more than a century. Over the decades, the perceived threat of media and popular culture to high cultural values and traditional forms of literacy has been offset by promises that being involved in certain sanctioned forms of media production and distribution would counter the presumed deleterious effects through a logic of inoculation. The emergence of the Internet and the digital economy has solidified—rather than created—the bond between technology and education.

Exhibiting a desire to justify their existence in the neoliberal economy by claiming to produce labor market-ready, flexible, tech-savvy workers, cash-strapped educational institutions—including those at the postsecondary level—have become ever more closely bound to technology producers (Bady, 2013; Rotella, 2013). In this context, practices of media literacy become a self-protective strategy, so as not to bite the hand that feeds. Within the logic this practice provides, critical approaches to the production of media messages compete for attention with other aspects of the risk society, such as information about online security and safety as well as anxieties about cyberbullying, identity theft, violent video games,

viral advertising, terrorism recruiting, and all the typical fears that surround modern youth (Shade, 2011). Media literacy promises resources for practices of freedom in this new fearful media environment, but questions about how media literacy itself legitimates education under technocapitalism also need to be posed.

From a cultural studies perspective, the rise of media literacy discourse is clearly linked to a constellation of social, political, and economic conditions—primary among them neoliberalism. The logics that it mobilizes—of inoculation against degraded culture, of reason over mindless pleasures, and of the active use of media for democracy—engage a set of deep-seated governmental problematics productive of the subject of modernity, *homo economicus* (Foucault, 2008). Proponents of all political stripes support the essentially governmental imaginary that an educated subject will be protected against a destructive system thanks to guidance that will make him or her aware of the connections between knowledge and power. This approach aims to mobilize the media themselves as a democratic counterforce, presuming the vulnerability of corporate media to critique. However, corporate media culture, more pervasive than ever, has come to demand this critique, which at the very least serves to legitimize its self-proclaimed provision of diverse choices on neutral platforms. For the most part, ideas about media literacy appear to operate seamlessly to help young people become better media consumers and media producers within the structural compulsion to participate that drives communicative capitalism.

In placing current media literacy discourse in relation to long-standing practices of using media as an efficient means to introduce modern practices—including market relations—into education, what I have offered here is an incentive for future research. More consideration is required, I contend, of the work that media literacy discourse performs in various institutional and policy contexts—in the United States and beyond. Institutional education, as an intrinsic part of the project of modernity, has been consistently criticized for not integrating fully enough a range of techniques and technologies that would engage students more effectively. Historical examples show that, in the United States, the marketplace is perpetually being presented as a more efficient educator than are public educational institutions, consistently marked as conservative and beleaguered. This is not new. Nor, for that matter, is the appropriation of the seemingly oppositional discipline of media studies into the mainstream of K-12 and postsecondary education, which has taken place over four decades or more. However, with the advent of communicative capitalism and compulsory digital participation, normative discourses of media literacy as tied to citizenship, participatory democracy, and even diversity cannot be assumed to work in univocal ways. What demands the attention of critical communication scholars now are the ways such ideas are articulated—however unwittingly—to forms of governmental justification immanent to the current neoliberal formation.

### References

- Alhassan, A. (2007). The canonic economy of communication and culture: The centrality of the postcolonial margins. *Canadian Journal of Communication, 32*(1), 103–118.
- Andrejevic, M. (2008). Watching television without pity: The productivity of online fans. *Television and New Media, 9*(1), 24–46.
- Bady, A. (2013). The MOOC moment and the end of reform. *Liberal Education, 99*(4), 6.
- Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers, Trans.). New York, NY: Hill & Wang.
- Bazalgette, C., & Buckingham, D. (2013). Literacy, media and multimodality: A critical response. *Literacy, 47*(2), 95–102.
- Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2005). *The new spirit of capitalism*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Bottomore, S. (1999). The panicking audience? Early cinema and the “train effect.” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 19*(2), 177–216.
- Buckingham, D. (2003). *Media education: Literacy, learning and contemporary culture*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Buckingham, D. (2005). *The media literacy of children and young people: A review of the research literature on behalf of Ofcom*. London, UK: Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media Institute of Education, University of London.
- Burgess, J. (2013). *Media literacy 2.0: A sampling of programs around the world*. Washington, DC: Center for International Media Assistance. Retrieved from [http://internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/CIMA-MediaLiteracy\\_2\\_0-11-21-2013.pdf](http://internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/CIMA-MediaLiteracy_2_0-11-21-2013.pdf)
- Burn, A., & Durran, J. (2007). *Media literacy in schools: Practice, production and progression*. London, UK: Paul Chapman.
- Burns, J. M. (2002). *Flickering shadows: Cinema and identity in colonial Zimbabwe*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.
- Burroughs, S., Brocato, K., Hopper, P. F., & Sanders, A. (2009). Media literacy: A central component of democratic citizenship. *Educational Forum, 73*(2), 154–167.
- Carpenter, E. S. (1973). *Oh, what a blow that phantom gave me!* New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

- Cowie, N. (2000). Media literacy and the commercialization of culture. In R. Andersen & L. Strate (Eds.), *Critical studies in media commercialization* (pp. 310–323). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Cuban, L. (1986). *Teachers and machines: The classroom use of technology since 1920*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies: Communicative capitalism and left politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Druick, Z. (2007). The International Educational Cinematograph Institute, reactionary modernism, and the formation of film studies. *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 16(1), 80–97.
- Druick, Z. (2011). UNESCO, film, and education: Mediating postwar paradigms of communication (pp. 81–102). In C. Acland & H. Wasson (Eds.), *Useful cinema: Expanding film contexts* (pp. 81–102). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dworkin, D. L. (1997). *Cultural Marxism in postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the origins of cultural studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Elkins, J. (2008). *Visual literacy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Firestone, C. M. (1993). "Foreword." In P. Aufderheide, *Media literacy: A report of the national leadership conference on media literacy* (pp. v–vii). Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, Communications and Society Program.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *The history of sexuality: Vol 1. An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979* (G. Burchell, Trans.). New York, NY: Picador.
- Fraser, N. (2009). Feminism, capitalism and the cunning of history. *New Left Review*, 56, 97–117.
- Gillies, D. (2008). Developing governmentality: Conduct<sup>3</sup> and education policy. *Journal of Education Policy*, 23(4), 415–427.
- Goldfarb, B. (2002). *Visual pedagogy: Media cultures in and beyond the classroom*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Graff, H. J. (1979). *The literacy myth: Literacy and social structure in the nineteenth-century city*. New York, NY: Academic Press.



- Graff, H. J. (1987). *The labyrinths of literacy: Reflections of literacy past and present*. London, UK: Falmer Press.
- Greene, R. W. (2005). Y movies: Film and the modernization of pastoral power. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 20–36.
- Gunning, T. (1989). An aesthetic of astonishment: Early film and the (in)credulous spectator. *Art and Text*, 34(Spring), 31–45.
- Hallin, D. (2008). Neoliberalism, social movements and change in media systems in the late twentieth century. In D. Hesmondhalgh & J. Toynbee (Eds.), *The media and social theory* (pp. 43–58). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (2004). *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of empire*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.
- Hermes, J., van den Berg, A., & Mol, M. (2013). Sleeping with the enemy: Audience studies and critical literacy. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16(5), 457–472.
- Hobbs, R. (1998). The seven great debates in the media literacy movement. *Journal of Communication*, 48(1), 16–32.
- Hobbs, R., & Jensen, A. (2009). The past, present, and future of media literacy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 1, 1–11.
- Hobbs, R., & Moore, D. C. (2013). *Discovering media literacy: Teaching digital media and popular culture in elementary school*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Hoechsmann, M., & Poyntz, S. R. (2012). *Media literacies: A critical introduction*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hoggart, R. (1957). *The uses of literacy: Changing patterns in English mass culture*. Fair Lawn, NJ: Essential Books.
- Hunter, I. (1988). *Culture and government: The emergence of literary education*. London, UK: Macmillan.
- Ito, M., Horst, H., Bittani, M., boyd, d., Herr-Stephenson, B., Lange, P., Pascoe, C., & Robinson, L. (2009). *Learning and living with new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jenkins, H., Purushotma, R., Weigel, M., Clinton, K., & Robison, A. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jewitt, C., & Kress, G. R. (2003). *Multimodal literacy*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

- Kist, W. (2005). *New literacies in action: Teaching and learning in multiple media*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Lemish, D., & Lemish, P. (1997). A much debated consensus: Media literacy in Israel. In R. W. Kubey (Ed.), *Media literacy in the information age: Current perspectives* (pp. 213–228). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Lewis, T. (2007). Biopolitical utopianism in educational theory. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 39(7), 683–702.
- Lindo-Fuentes, H., & Ching, E. K. (2012). *Modernizing minds in El Salvador: Education reform and the Cold War, 1960–1980*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Masterman, L. (1997). A rationale for media education. In R. W. Kubey (Ed.), *Media literacy in the information age: Current perspectives* (pp. 15–68). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- McLuhan, M. (1960). *Project in understanding new media: A report*. (Unpublished report). Urbana, IL: United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare/National Association of Educational Broadcasters.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Mihailidis, P. (2009). *Media literacy: Empowering youth worldwide*. Washington, DC: Center for International Media Assistance. Retrieved from <http://cima.ned.org/publication/media-literacy-empowering-youth-worldwide/>
- Moeller, S. (2009a). *Media literacy: Citizen journalists*. Washington, DC: Center for International Media Assistance. Retrieved from <http://www.cima.ned.org/publication/media-literacy-citizen-journalists/>
- Moeller, S. (2009b). *Media literacy: Understanding the news*. Washington, DC: Center for International Media Assistance. Retrieved from <http://www.cima.ned.org/publication/media-literacy-understanding-the-news/>
- Olssen, M. (2006). Understanding the mechanisms of neoliberal control: Lifelong learning, flexibility and knowledge capital. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 25(3), 213–230.
- Orgeron, D., Orgeron, M., & Streible, D. (2012). *Learning with the lights off: Educational film in the United States*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2015). *Fast policy: Experimental statecraft at the thresholds of neoliberalism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

- Penman, R., & Turnbull, S. (2007). *Media literacy—concepts, research and regulatory issues* (Report). Sydney, Australia: Australian Communications and Media Authority.
- Perlman, A. (2010). Television up in the air: The Midwest program on airborne television instruction, 1959–1971. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 27(5), 477–497.
- Peters, C. (1998, February). Media literacy. *Z Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://zcomm.org/zmagazine/media-literacy-by-cynthia-peters/>
- Potter, W. J. (2011). *Media literacy*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Potter, W. J. (2013). Review of literature on media literacy. *Sociology Compass*, 7(6), 417–435.
- Richtel, M. (2011, October 23). A Silicon Valley school that doesn't compute. *The New York Times*, A1.
- Rivoltella, P. C. (2008). *Digital literacy: Tools and methodologies for information society*. Hershey, PA: IGI.
- Rotella, C. (2013), No child left untableted. *New York Times Magazine*, 26.
- Rubin, A. M. (1998). Media literacy. *Journal of Communication*, 48(1), 3–4.
- Saettler, L. P. (1968). *A history of instructional technology*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Schramm, W. L. & International Institute for Educational Planning. (1967a). *New educational media in action: Case studies for planners, Vol. 1-3*. Paris, France: UNESCO.
- Schramm, W. L., & International Institute for Educational Planning. (1967b). *The new media: Memo to educational planners*. Paris, France: UNESCO.
- Schramm, W. L., Nelson, L. M., & Betham, M. T. (1981). *Bold experiment: The story of educational television in American Samoa*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Shade, L. R. (2011). Surveilling the girl via the third and networked screen. In M. C. Kearney (Ed.), *Mediated girlhoods: New explorations of girls' media culture* (pp. 261–275). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Shor, I., & Friere, P. (1987). *A pedagogy for liberation*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Simons, M. (2006). Learning as investment: Notes on governmentality and biopolitics. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 38(4), 523–540.

- Simpson, C. (1994). *Science of coercion: Communication research and psychological warfare, 1945–1960*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Skinner, B. F. (1958). Teaching machines. *Science*, 128(3330), 969–977.
- Sourbati, M. (2009). Media literacy and universal access in Europe. *Information Society*, 25(4), 248–254.
- Thoman, E., & Jolls, T. (2003). *Literacy for the 21st century: An overview and orientation guide to media literacy education*. Malibu, CA: Center for Media Literacy. Retrieved from <http://www.medialit.org/reading-room/literacy-21st-century-overview-orientation-guide-media-literacy-education>
- Turner, F. (2006). *From counterculture to cyberculture: Stewart brand, the whole earth network, and the rise of digital utopianism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tyner, K. R. (2010). *Media literacy: New agendas in communication*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wasson, H. (2005). *Museum movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the birth of art cinema*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Wehmeyer, J. (2000). Critical media studies and the North American media literacy movement. *Cinema Journal*, 39(4), 94–101.
- Williams, B., & Zenger, A. A. (2012). *New media literacies and participatory popular culture across borders*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Williams, R. (1962). *Communications*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books.
- Williams, R. (2007). *The politics of modernism: Against the new conformists*. London, UK: Verso.
- Wilson, J. (1961). Film illiteracy in Africa. *Canadian Communications*, 1(4), 7–14.