

## What is Media and Information Literacy?\*

During the past decades, the media landscape and media culture have undergone major changes. Modern information technology has given rise to a constantly increasing supply of media products – increasingly unbound to time and space. Convergence, fragmentation, diversification and individualization are characteristics frequently taken up in the debate on our contemporary media culture. This phase of development was already discernible in the 1980s, with the advent of new forms of distribution such as video, satellite TV and cable TV. Even then, many parents, teachers and political decision-makers expressed their concerns about the negative effects of the media on children and young people. As long as modern mass media have existed, there have been some concerns about how the media affect particularly children and young people, but these concerns have increased along with technological development in the media field. The topic of violence in the media has received a great deal of attention.

Different actors have during recent decades discussed how legislation and voluntary self-regulation might be used to limit the spread of media content classifiable as harmful. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child from 1989 provides a framework in the form of Article 17, which states that those countries that have ratified the convention shall ensure that children and young people have access to information from different national and international sources, particularly information intended to promote their social, spiritual and moral well-being as well as their physical and mental health. To this end, appropriate guidelines shall be developed to protect children and young people from information and material that are detrimental to their well-being. In various official documents from as well national public authorities as regional and international organisations protection of minors is described as an issue of great public interest. One basic point of departure is that children are different from adults in that they are more vulnerable, less critical and more susceptible to influence because they lack the experience and frames of reference necessary for understanding certain circumstances.

Early on in the debate, children and young people were often viewed as helpless victims seated before the TV screen. The questions at issue developed during the 1990s, and there was increased interest in media culture in a broader sense. Most researchers pointed out that while the media are assumed to create problems, they also constitute social and cultural resources, and that, in many respects, young people are quite capable of meeting the challenges of today's media products. Thus, during recent decades, the main focus of the debate has shifted from legislation and restrictions to adult responsibility, which includes the media industry, parents and the schools. In this connection, the importance of knowledge about the media and media influences – or 'media literacy' – is stressed. Inherent in media literacy is the notion that 'protection' need not mean that children and young people should be kept from watching, e.g., certain TV programmes, but that it instead means promoting their media knowledge and helping them to become cognizant media consumers.

Among the prerequisites of media literacy are understanding how the media function, how they construct reality and create meaning, and how they are organized as well as knowing how to use the media in a sensible way. Overall, this is a question of strengthening children's and young people's critical abilities as well as their ability to express themselves in many different ways, through pictures, sounds and words. This does not merely involve providing theoretical knowledge, but also knowledge gained through practical experience. Considerable emphasis is placed on allowing young people to actively participate in programme production.

The concept of 'media literacy' was established in the US during the 1980s and was, at first, closely tied to children's media environment, where media violence and commercialism were under scrutiny. Yet media literacy is a considerably broader concept than 'media education', which only refers to the mission of the schools (where there is great consensus, e.g., within the EU, that the schools are responsible for introducing children's media culture into teaching). The point of departure of the two concepts is, however, the same, that is, that the media construct reality, that audiences interpret media content on the basis of their own preferences, that the media have commercial as well as social and political significations, that the media contain ideological messages, that form and content are closely related and that every medium has an aesthetic form.

With time, media literacy has even come to include *adults*. Media literacy embraces everything from having the knowledge needed to use old and new media technology to having a critical relationship to media content in a time when the media constitute one of the most powerful forces in society. Proponents of media literacy view increased media knowledge in society as contributing to participation, active citizenship, competence development and life-long learning. In this way, the population's media literacy becomes a necessary part of ensuring a democratic society.

Several books and articles have been written about media literacy, and many attempts at defining the concept have been made. Leading researchers in the field

often use the following trichotomy: media literacy implies having *access* to the media, *understanding* the media and *creating/expressing* oneself using the media. (Buckingham 2005, Livingstone 2005)

*Access* includes having the use of media as well as media habits: the ability to use functions and navigation competence (e.g., changing TV channels/channel orientation, using Internet links); competence in controlling media (e.g., using interactive on-line systems, making financial transactions on the Internet); knowledge of legislation and other regulations in the area (e.g., freedom of speech, protection of privacy, knowledge of the meaning of harmful material, protection from 'spam').

*Understanding* includes having the ability both to understand/interpret and to gain perspective on media content as well as having a critical attitude.

*Creating* includes interacting with the media (calling radio programmes to express ideas, participating in discussion rooms on the Internet, e-voting, etc.) as well as producing media content. Having the experience of producing material for different media helps form both a better understanding of and a critical approach to media content.

The concept of media literacy has primarily engaged researchers in Western countries as England, Canada and the US. Many of them start from the notion that, in a democratic society, an individual who has knowledge of the media will more easily acquire a well-founded opinion on societal issues/events and, thereby, will be better equipped to express his/her opinion, individually as well as collectively, in public and other social contexts.

Thus, media literacy is a question of skills, knowledge and competencies, but it is also dependent on the institutions, texts and techniques through which information and communication are mediated. Analytically, the concept of media literacy is used both at the individual and the societal level.

New information and communication technologies face young media users with new media formats through the convergence and more often a distinction is done between *media literacy* and literacy regarding new skills where the terminology shifts between digital literacy, cyber-literacy, internet literacy and web-literacy. Interactive media like the Internet also imply invitations to risky behaviour in real life in connection with media use. A more gathering term is *information literacy*. UNESCO has initiated several projects and one definition among others is the following: "information literacy encompasses knowledge of one's information concerns and needs, and the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, organize and effectively create, use and communicate information to address issues and problems at hand" (US National Information Literacy Meeting on Experts, 2003).

Media literacy, has been defined and developed in relation to audiovisual media, while the information literacy has been developed in relation to various new digital systems for representing and distributing information. Media literacy has tended to focus on cultural expression and is marked by a critical dimension. This critical dimension is often missing in the current concept of "information literacy", which focuses more on "technical" skills, such as using ICT to find and gather and to

“Central to any discussion of literacy is the question of purpose. What is the purpose of media literacy, information literacy, or any other literacy, and why do they matter? From the literature discussed in this chapter, we draw out three broad purposes to which media and information literacies may contribute. These purposes also, though often only implicitly, drive the policy debates over literacy. First, democracy, participation and active citizenship: in a democratic society, a media and information-literate individual is more able to gain an informed opinion on matters of the day, and to be able to express their opinion individually and collectively in public, civic and political domains, while a media and information-literate society would thus support a sophisticated, critical and inclusive public sphere. Second, knowledge economy, competitiveness and choice: in a market economy increasingly based on information, often in a complex and mediated form, a media and information-literate individual is likely to have more to offer and so achieve at a higher level in the workplace, and a media and information-literate society would be innovative and competitive, sustaining a rich array of choices for the consumer. Third, lifelong learning, cultural expression and personal fulfillment: since our highly reflexive, heavily mediated symbolic environment informs and frames the choices, values and knowledge that give significance to everyday life, media and information literacy contributes to the critical and expressive skills that support a full and meaningful life, and to an informed, creative and ethical society.”

Livingstone, S., van Couvering, E., and Thumim, N.: Converging traditions of research on media and information literacies: Disciplinary, critical and methodological issues. In D.J. Leu, J. Coiro, M. Knobel and C. Lankshear (Eds.) *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

distribute information. One might say that the focus is on users of ICT rather than on citizens who use ICT. Given the increasing convergence of radio, television, and computer technology “information literacy” is increasingly linked up with issues of democracy and active, participatory citizenship. A conclusion is that there is a need for bringing media literacy and information literacy (e-strategy, e-culture, e-learning) together in a multi-factor, riskbased framework to further promote the role of citizens and their participation in society. (Livingstone 2005 and 2006).

Having media- and information literate individuals in a society promotes a critical, open and all-embracing public sphere. The medialized symbolic environment we live in today largely shapes the choices, values and knowledge that determine our everyday lives. At the same time communication through the media can contribute to development and social change. Media and information literacy helps, therefore, to strengthen the critical abilities and communicative skills that give the individual’s existence meaning, while promoting a well-oriented, democratic knowledge society.

\* This introduction is compiled by Ulla Carlsson

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