



KEY QUESTIONS FOR MEDIA LITERACY AND MEDIA POLICIES

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What is Media Literacy about? Is it about creativity, or is its focus citizenship education? Do the 6 educational segments media literacy is closely allied with blur the essence of what media literacy stands for? The following notes on the 6 Key Questions raise a number of interesting and also controversial issues of what media literacy is or should be.

Why are we using the term "media literacy"?

The very term "media literacy" is inherited from an outworn and discredited 20th century tactic: that of adding the term "literacy" to topics and issues in an attempt to promote them as new but essential aspects of learning. Terms such as financial literacy, digital literacy, emotional literacy, computer literacy and critical literacy may thus become temporarily fashionable, but they have little purchase on realpolitik at national level. To append the term "literacy" to a topic is almost to guarantee its marginality in educational or social planning: it invokes a supplicant role, pleading for recognition through special projects and short term initiatives.

By using the term "media literacy" we also accept an anglocentric world view, given that the word "literacy" does not translate easily from English into other languages. There is rarely any discussion in media literacy publications about the ambivalent and shifting usage of the word "literacy" in English, or about the different connotations provided by its available equivalents in other languages. This generates even more scope than usual for misunderstanding when we attempt to have an international dialogue about media literacy. It is probably better to stick to the term "media education" - as the French do anyway!

I would like to argue at the outset that as advocates for media education we need to pluck up our courage and gather the resources we'll need in order to engage with and intervene in national and international debate about what every person ought to know about, understand and be able to do. Whatever words are used in each language to designate such essential learning in national curricula and other entitlement documents, we can be sure that such debate does go on in each culture and is often heavily politicised. By doing this we would necessarily enter the political arena at a higher level than most of us do at present. We might also have to leave behind the parochial debates of the media literacy movement and address the bigger picture: what are the needs of 21st century learners?

The stakes are high. 21st century citizens everywhere face unprecedented changes in the ways they access knowledge, share ideas and participate politically. At the same time, global corporations face unprecedented opportunities to profit from the control of information, the inflection of cultural and political choices, and the circulation of ideas. Sooner or later, and for good or ill, these changes will affect the ways that education (as a life-long process, not just in schools) is accessed, and the extent to which it is managed by the state and/or by other agencies. Media educators have the



knowledge and skills to be at the centre of these developments. But do we have the will?

Whose interests does media literacy serve?

Each of the six "Key Questions" or Issues that have been identified for this session by the conference organisers represents a particular tendency, a set of priorities, for defining the primary purpose of media literacy. Each, taken on its own, can pull education for media literacy in one particular direction. But to address these six questions/issues is not a matter of comfortable academic debate about which we may prefer, or how best each can be "delivered". They need to be considered in context, because each of the questions/issues is often identified with the interests of particular sectors or agencies, rather than with the interests of learners. And each of these sectors or agencies may well have an additional interest in excluding some if not all of the approaches indicated by the other questions/issues. By confining media literacy to one or two of these areas, the marginality of media literacy is maintained. But at the same time, media literacy does need allies in order to develop. So we need to consider which allies we can work with, and which may prove to be false friends.

I have thus framed my comments on the six questions/issues by inviting readers in each case to consider not only what learners may gain from each, but also which sectors and agencies are likely to emphasise this approach, and in what political conjunctures such an approach might have a purchase with policy-makers.

This doesn't mean that I object to any of these approaches. All of them are valid: but this only underlines my argument that media literacy needs to be part of much bigger and more politically focused debates. All of these approaches need to be available to learners, but the breadth of different types of practice represented here means that media literacy cannot be provided through a single agency, project or curriculum.

The inevitable danger here is that the arguments for media literacy become incoherent and dispersed, and therefore ineffective. However, I am sceptical in any case about the possibility of reaching international agreement about a single argument or programme for media literacy, except at the level of generality represented by, for example, the EC's recommendations or the Charter for Media Literacy. In each country, different configurations of agencies and different political priorities offer different opportunities for media literacy advocates. And in each country, media literacy advocates should be looking at their proposals in the wider context of national education policy.

Notes on the six Key Questions/Issues

Each question/issue presents an interesting set of tensions: of potential alternative interpretations. These tensions and alternatives can be discussed in the abstract as aspects of learning that may be more, or less, worthwhile. But they can also be discussed in the context of whose interests they serve, and thus what opportunities they may offer for securing funding or policy approval. While media literacy remains a relatively small and marginal sector, practitioners may well be forced to emphasise just one of these questions at the expense of the others, in order to pursue funding or establish a foothold in policy. While this may seem sensible or even laudable, it contributes both to confused public perceptions of media literacy and can help to lower its status in the policy context.



Q1 A Multicultural Approach

Education for media literacy can easily be seen as a vehicle to develop understanding of different world cultures. Learners can use the internet to publish and exchange accounts of lifestyles and experiences in different countries and cultures. Audio-visual texts can transcend linguistic boundaries. People in different places around the world can participate in games or use conferencing software to experience cross-cultural collaboration and dialogue. The experience of collective production work by a multicultural group of learners can in itself promote understanding. Any of these approaches may be used by teachers, community workers and other educators to try and build social cohesion and to lessen tensions between ethnic and/or religious groups. Media educators may invoke these approaches in order to secure funding from sponsors, charities or government agencies responsible for multicultural issues. The same arguments may be used by cultural agencies such as film institutes and independent distributors in promoting world cinema titles to programmers and educators.

The problem here is that gains in multicultural learning are likely to predominate over any media learning that may be taking place. It is the multicultural learning that will be described and valued. It's easily assumed that learners will just invisibly develop their own understanding of media techniques and choices alongside their experiences of cross-cultural communication. But where media learning is not made explicit and not reflected upon, there is little opportunity for the learner (with or without teacher guidance) to consider their level of media literacy and identify what they need to learn next.

Q2 Being at home with the media and personal responsibility

Regulators and policy-makers have to negotiate the tricky dual responsibility of encouraging citizens to embrace the latest technologies with enthusiasm, while at the same time as ensuring that they are protected from media intrusions such as invasions of privacy by advertisers, cyberbullying or potentially offensive media content. Calling this "media literacy" and expecting people to regulate themselves is one way out of the dilemma, but it can reduce media literacy to a relatively narrow set of technical skills and gatekeeping routines. However, regulators and policy-makers are likely to welcome a simplified and narrow agenda for media literacy, given that they inevitably favour simple (and cheap) solutions, and that they have a clear interest in encouraging the development of a strong digital economy.

Some media literacy advocates make similar arguments but point to practice that involves much wider range of activity. Learners' individual and informal engagement with the media and their consequent issues about choices of content (for viewing/listening/playing) may be addressed, as may their critical skills in identifying and analysing media content to which they object. In the context of production work they may also cover issues of ethics and copyright as an aspect of exercising personal responsibility. There is therefore nothing wrong with this approach in principle, but it is the voices of regulators and policy-makers that are more likely to be heard, and the narrower, simpler agenda is thus more likely to be promoted.

Q3 A political approach; citizenship and human rights

For many media educators this is their core business: ensuring that learners acquire the critical tools to interrogate media content, to reject bias and stereotyping, and to raise awareness of the patterns of ownership and influence that drive the



production and distribution of media content. For some this extends to the creative process of making alternative media content, or of using media to challenge rights abuses. In many countries the media and even government have a vested interest in not supporting this rather more disruptive or subversive aspect of media education, and consequently regulators are also likely to be lukewarm about it, even though it might be thought an important part of their remit. If support is available at all in these contexts, it is from NGOs who are unlikely to provide extensive or long term funding.

An extension of this approach could be concerned with citizens' rights to cultural goods and diversity of cultural choice, but many media educators neglect this aspect, focusing exclusively on the mainstream media content that is available, and tending to neglect non-mainstream media content which is harder to access. This approach can also offer a narrow media literacy agenda that neglects questions of personal pleasure and imaginative possibilities.

Q4 Creativity and Production in Media Literacy

This is increasingly presented and promoted as what media literacy is all about. Sponsors of every kind have no trouble in funding production projects - especially those involving children and young people - which claim to express their views and demonstrate their creativity, and may offer the added advantage of showing off the capabilities of various software and hardware packages. For media companies in particular that can be a convenient way of displaying an interest in media literacy while dispensing with the inconvenience of encouraging critical analysis that might be negative. Although funding of production work is a popular option for sponsors, too many choose a short-term initiative such as a competition, rather than investing in a longer-term - but perhaps lower profile - project that would allow learners to improve on their first efforts and to develop their skills over time.

A number of issues continue to arise in relation to creative production activity that takes place under the banner of "media literacy", which are exacerbated by the lack of longer-term funding or planning. The actual extent of learners' conscious, personal creative decisions may be very unclear: often the work that is thought to be "difficult" or "boring" (such as editing) is done by professionals, including the addition of powerful sound tracks that can substantially increase the impact of a badly-made film. Learners often have no opportunity to practise or develop their craft by having repeated opportunities for making media. And all too often learners embark on a particular genre of media production without ever having had the opportunity to analyse examples of the genre and to consider how their product will relate to them. Even amongst media educators, views about what kinds of production work are appropriate in different contexts or with different age groups can vary widely, and younger children's capabilities are often under-estimated.

The development of creativity and production as a key aspect of media literacy is clearly enormously important, but we should beware of uncritically adopting the corporate hype that claims it is simple and accessible to everyone. We should also resist the tendency to see media production work only as an apprenticeship for professional work in the media. It should be valued as an important set of skills that everyone should be able to learn.

Q5 Evaluating media skills

On the face of it, many of the problems I have identified in relation to the other five questions/issues could be ameliorated if there were agreed standards, progression models and assessment criteria for media literacy. There have been many attempts at these but little agreement. One key reason for this is that there has been very little research on education for



media literacy that has produced credible evidence on progression and attainment, but it has to be acknowledged that any attempt to establish such frameworks for evaluation is always fraught with controversy and that we are bound to end up with a number of different models.

We must however recognise that if media literacy is to gain the status it deserves there have to be some recognisable criteria for claiming that individual learners have achieved a certain level of media literacy and can demonstrate not only their skills but also their knowledge and understanding.

The downside of this is that faulty models are bound to emerge: dreary catalogues of decontextualised skills; pointless hierarchies of knowledge; administratively unwieldy systems for assessment. These are to be expected, and much time will be expended on arguing about them. But to be at least having arguments about standards, progression and assessment would still be an improvement on the present situation.

The question here however must be: who has an interest in developing this aspect of media literacy? It became possible in the UK (at least for 16 and 18 year olds) because of its market-driven examination system: Media Studies and Film Studies examinations have proved to be a lucrative product for the companies that offer competing examination specifications. But most countries do not have such an arrangement and it can be extremely difficult to insert new qualifications into their systems at any level. There is then a temptation to prove that media literacy can benefit existing curricular subjects. This is of course true, but it serves once again to reduce the status of media literacy to that of an ancillary support to higher-status subjects. A different scenario would be to define media literacy in more vocational terms: as a key qualification for employment, but this would probably entail a narrower set of skills than many of us would want to contemplate.

Once again, the inexorable conclusion seems to be that media literacy advocates must take issue with the core subjects of the curriculum and join the debates that at least some other educators recognise: that 21st century education has to acknowledge the changed communications environment and transform itself accordingly. A curriculum essentially devised in the 19th century can no longer serve our needs.

Q6 Media Literacy, identity and cultural globalisation

There are potential overlaps here with the first question/issue, in that an intelligent address to multiculturalism in media must open up questions about representation: about who is represented and who is not, and why. Given the shifts in the balance of media power afforded by the digital revolution, this could be the most interesting aspect of media literacy to develop: seeking ways of maintaining local, regional and national voices in the face of global media giants.

Once again, we need to ask who has an interest in helping to develop this aspect of media literacy. Cultural and linguistic communities that are threatened by cultural imperialism have an obvious interest and it is clear that this theme contributes to the European Commission's interest in media literacy as a way of supporting European cultural production. The danger, as with Q1, is that the specific interests of media literacy could be swamped by national or regional cultural agendas. A potentially important counter-initiative is the development of media literacy projects that link cultural and linguistic communities on a global scale.



To suggest that we might have to leave the term "media literacy" behind is not to undervalue this movement and its history. But every gathering of media educators that I have ever attended has always tried to accommodate a vast range of different approaches and emphases. For me, the important question we need to address is not so much about which aspect of media literacy do we favour or want to include but what are the incontrovertible, minimum principles that we could never exclude? What is it that must characterise anything that claims to be media literacy? If we could agree on that, we could agree on what it is that media educators uniquely bring to the big debates on education.

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