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What is media literacy?

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The changing nature and uses of media literacy

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<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/whoswho/Sonia.Livingstone.htm>

The question of media literacy

It is increasingly important that we as a society are able not only to identify but also to facilitate the acquisition of those skills and abilities required by the population at large to use today's information and communication technologies effectively and safely.

These skills and abilities are much debated in relation to the labour market, education, the home, leisure, communication environments and so forth. And often different sectors have very different kinds of skills in mind – including low-level technical skills (typing, installing a modem and getting an ISP, operating the electronic programme device) and very high level skills (participating on democratic debate online, critically evaluating open government, contributing to one's culture creatively).

OFCOM

In the UK policy debate, these and other skills, abilities and understandings have been brought under the heading of 'media literacy' in the 2003 Communications Bill. The debate is thus becoming focused on the following questions: What is media literacy? How is it changing in the new and converging media environment? What is media literacy for (and why does it matter if some have more than others)? How should it best be promoted?¹

Defining media literacy

In *The Changing Nature and Uses of Media Literacy*², I define media literacy as "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts".

This four-component model has the advantage of applying equally well to print, broadcasting and the internet. This is familiar territory for print and broadcasting, subject of many policy initiatives and educational curricula. This may encompass internet literacy, thus.

1. Access

Access rests on a dynamic and social process, not a one-off act of provision. Once initial access is established, developing literacy leads users to alter significantly and continually the conditions of access (updating, upgrading and extending hardware and software applications). Problematically, given socio-demographic inequalities in material, social and symbolic resources, inequalities in access to online knowledge, communication and participation will continue.

2. Analysis

People's engagement with both print and audiovisual media has been shown to rely on a range of analytic competencies. In the audiovisual domain these include an understanding of the agency, categories, technologies, languages, representations and audiences for media. At present, not only is a parallel account of internet-related analytic skills highly underdeveloped but the public has yet to develop such skills and so to make the most of online opportunities.

¹ On the question of promotion, see Livingstone, with Thumim (2003)

² See Livingstone (2003). <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/mediaWorkingPapers/Default.htm>

3. Evaluation

There is little point in access or analysis without judgement, but a stress on evaluation raises, rightly, some difficult policy questions when specifying and legitimating appropriate bases of critical literacy – aesthetic, political, ideological and/or economic. The scope and purpose of evaluation is also disputed: is media literacy intended to promote a democratised, diverse, anti-elitist approach to online representations or should it underpin a more traditional, hierarchical discrimination of good from bad, authoritative from unauthorised, information and communication?

4. Content creation

Although not all definitions of media literacy include the requirement to create, to produce symbolic texts, it is argued first, that people attain a deeper understanding of the conventions and merits of professionally produced material if they have direct experience of content production and second, that the internet *par excellence* is a medium which offers hitherto unimagined opportunities for ordinary people to create online content. To exclude this from a definition of media literacy would be to greatly under-utilise the potential of the internet for the public.

Is the UK population media literate?

Adults

In our recent review of the literature regarding adult media literacy³, we observed the following. In relation to the media literacy expectations specified for OFCOM, it would seem, notwithstanding its sophistication in the understanding and evaluation of audiovisual materials with which it has long been familiar, that the public (1) has a far better understanding of ‘the nature and characteristics’ of audiovisual contents than it does of ‘materials published by the electronic media’; (2) may have only a weak understanding of ‘the processes by which materials are selected and made available’; (3) may have little understanding of ‘the available systems by which access to material is or can be regulated’; and (4) may have little understanding of ‘the available systems by which the public may control what is received’.

Children

In relation to children, a population of specific concern, their evident expertise in relation to the internet may often exceed that of their parents. However, it is considerably less strong in relation to evaluation skills and content creation skills. Thus children and young people are much better at accessing and finding things on the internet than they are in relation to other aspects of media literacy. Thus they are as yet insufficiently competent at judging the merits of information they find, at avoiding some of the risks posed to them by the internet, and at contributing actively themselves to content or participatory fora online.⁴

Issues to be addressed

Having advocated this skills-based approach to media literacy in relation to the internet, there are some outstanding issues for new media literacy, crucial to any policy of promoting media literacy among the population.

Relating individual skill, cultural knowledge and technological design

While insights from print and audiovisual media provide a valuable starting point, the literacy required for the use of new media, especially the internet, is also new in ways yet to be established. This is because media literacy is not reducible to a feature or skill of the user, but is better understood as a co-production of the interactive engagement between technology and user. Consequently, literacy is dependent on interface design and it changes as technology changes.

³ See Livingstone, with Thumim (2003).

⁴ See Livingstone (2002) and Livingstone and Bober (2003). Available at www.children-go-online.net.

The means of promoting media literacy

Several models exist for promoting and assessing public awareness and understanding, each of which could, with differing advantages and disadvantages, be applied to media literacy:⁵

Education: Children (and a small number of adults in further/higher education) are already routinely assessed through tests and exams for their media literacy, following delivery of a formal curriculum. Adults in the population at large could also be assessed using similar tests, and presumably their knowledge could then be graded according to the levels of the National Curriculum.

Public understanding of science: The public understanding of science model is a sizeable research programme used specifically to evaluate adults' knowledge of science. Since it seems that OFCOM will be required to promote adults' understanding of the systems and processes by which electronic media are made available, regulated and received, the survey methods established to measure aspects of public understanding and knowledge in the scientific domain may provide an appropriate methodology.

Print literacy: Measurement of print literacy among the adult population has a long history (with the most recent OECD figures showing "between one-quarter and three-quarters of adults fail to attain literacy level 3, considered by experts as a suitable minimum level skill for coping with the demands of modern life and work"; OECD, 2000). This model would suggest extending the measurement of print literacy to include audiovisual and screen-based media.

Health promotion: Public communication to improve health-related practices (eg the safe sex campaign, the anti-smoking campaign) seek to evaluate public knowledge and understanding following a particular campaign. Assuming OFCOM engages in specific activities – including information campaigns - to promote media literacy, parallel methods could be employed to evaluate take-up of the messages thereby promoted across different sectors of the population.

The purpose of promoting media literacy

What are the institutional, commercial and public interests at stake in promoting media literacy? Is media literacy intended to promote ideals of self-actualisation, cultural expression and aesthetic creativity or are these subordinate to the use of literacy to achieve a competitive advantage vital to a globalised information society? I argue that media literacy, like print literacy before it, should be recognised as a key means, even a right, by which citizens participate in society and by which the state regulates the manner and purposes of citizens' participation.

Why media literacy matters

Media literacy therefore concerns the *relationship* among textuality, competence and power. Indeed, literacy is a concept grounded in a centuries-old struggle between enlightenment and critical scholarship, setting those who see literacy as democratising, empowering of ordinary people against those who see it as elitist, divisive, a source of inequality. Debates over literacy are, in short, debates about the manner and purposes of public participation in society. Without a democratic and critical approach to media literacy, the public will be positioned merely as selective receivers, consumers of online information and communication. The promise of media literacy, surely, is that it can form part of a strategy to reposition the media user - from passive to active, from recipient to participant, from consumer to citizen.

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⁵ See Livingstone, with Thumim (2003).