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## Reflections on Global Developments in Media Literacy Education: Bridging Theory and Practice

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### Abstract<sup>1</sup>

The field of media literacy education is maturing, as evidenced by the quality of presentations of research and practice shared at the 2010 World Summit on Children and Media in Karlstad. In this article, we offer our reflections on the opportunities and challenges faced by media literacy educators as we build our global community network, develop a shared theoretical framework that transcends culture and nationality, and return to consider foundational questions about the relationship between power and agency as new visions of digital literacy emerge as educators and creative media professionals explore the new capacities and limitations of the Internet and social media.

*Keywords:* media literacy, Karlstad, children, media, technology, critical theory, research, international

One of the most influential and well-known theories on the development of science is that of Thomas S. Kuhn about the structure of scientific revolutions (1962, 1996), who proposes that science does not develop in a linear way, with a step-by-step accumulation of knowledge, but instead, it is a process of continuous revolutions during which one new powerful set of ideas replaces previously accepted ideas. This process is conceptualized as a linear sequence, beginning with a period of consolidation of a paradigm, followed by work conducted as *normal science*, a period of time during which all the efforts of the scientific community are inside the paradigm. At some point, there comes *extraordinary science*, a period of time when doubts are raised about the strength of the paradigm. This is followed by a paradigm shift, called a *scientific revolution* by Kuhn, where the old paradigm is replaced by a new one.

Could the field of media literacy education be entering a period of normal science? The editors of this special joint issue wondered about this possibility after participating in the 2010 World Summit on Children and

Media, held in Karlstad, June 14 -17, 2010. The articles included in this special joint issue, a collaborative effort developed by the editors of the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* (USA) and *Media Education: studi, ricerche, buone pratiche* (ITALY), offer some evidence that we have reached a phase of generalized agreement upon the definitions, aims and even the core instructional practices of media literacy education, even as this work occurs in a wide variety of settings, including in formal education and in tertiary contexts, and involves stakeholders who share their work on the broad range of issues that align with children, youth, media, and technology. In fact, at the Karlstad World Summit, the depth of focus on media literacy education was due in part to the diversity of participants. Medical professionals, children's media producers, university scholars, leaders of NGOs, and students came from all the continents to share experiences and learn from each other. In this article, we offer our reflections on the opportunities and challenges faced by media literacy educators as we build our global community network, develop a shared theoretical framework that

<sup>1</sup> The Authors discussed and agreed together on the structure and the content of the article. However, section 1 was written by Renee Hobbs, section 2 by Damiano Felini, and section 3 by Gianna Cappello.

transcends culture and nationality, and return to consider foundational questions about the relationship between power and agency as new visions of digital literacy emerge as educators and creative media professionals explore the new capacities and limitations of the Internet and social media.

### **A Global Community Network for Media Literacy Education**

Because of important differences in regional, national, and cultural values as well as the institutional systems and regulatory structures of both media industries and education systems, it's difficult to make generalizations about how various cultural priorities are shaping individual and collaborative actions when it comes to media literacy education. However, participants of the Karlstad conference demonstrated considerable respect for both *critical analysis and media production* as the centerpost methodologies of practice. Other common themes inflected the work of educators and scholars, among them the power of *youth voice* as a means of social change, the process of recognizing and resisting demeaning patterns of *representation* that limit and trivialize the human condition, and the evolution of the dynamic tension between *protection and empowerment* perspectives in relation to children, youth, media, and society. For many at Karlstad, the rise of the Internet and *social media* was a key topic of interest as was the institutionalization of *youth marketing*, the role of *active audience* theory and digital technology in relationship media literacy, the development of *news and current events* programming for children and teens, the role of media literacy in supporting practices of *democratic citizenship*, and strategies for managing the *diminishing fiscal and material resources* available for children's media.

Whether working inside or outside systems of institutional power, participants of the Karlstad conference revealed both the value of institutional collaboration and the efficacy of the individual researcher, teacher, media professional, or advocate. However, because media literacy attracts this wide range of stakeholders, the production of new knowledge in the field was not limited to the work of academic scholars. At Karlstad, teachers, administrators, media professionals, and advocates shared their experiences in ways that contributed to new knowledge in the field. Case studies of classroom practice, descriptions of new programs and initiatives, and reports of empirical research provided opportunities for discussion.

In cooperation with NORDICOM and The International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, four Research Forums were held during the World Summit. In a refreshing sign of the maturing of the field, there was very little in the way of inflated promotional language and overbroad generalizations about the transformative power of media literacy education at these sessions. In nearly every case, the strengths and limitations of particular projects and research were emphasized. Key characteristics of this work included theoretical framing, careful description of practices or clarity in identifying outcome measures, and precision and integrity in reporting program results, impacts, and consequences. Epistemological values were demonstrated as practitioners' voices were respected and seen as deserving of power, with little of the hierarchical gamesmanship that can sometimes position theory as superior to practice. At a number of sessions, new knowledge emerged from the inquiry process after the formal presentation was concluded. In a variety of question-and-answer sessions, presenters were encouraged to reflect on their work and members of audience engaged in spirited discussion about particular topics relevant to the design, implementation, and assessment of media literacy programs and initiatives. In informal gatherings hosted by Per Lundgren, Ulla Carlsson, and our Scandinavian colleagues, we had additional opportunities to share ideas and better understand the social, political, and cultural contexts in which we work and live. At the World Summit, scholars and advocates described a variety of small innovative projects, but displayed frustration with the challenge of finding funding to support large-scale research initiatives and the publicity needed to mobilize communities. At the same time, leaders of NGOs described feeling marginalized by government while government officials described the limitations of their power in relation to regulatory solutions to address the implementation of media literacy in the home and school.

### **The Emergence of a Shared Theoretical Framework**

Besides the establishment of a global community network for media literacy education, another sign of what we could say a "normal science period" in our field is the emergence of a globally shared theoretical framework.

Media literacy education is rooted in the work of early 20th century educational scholars. The practice of cultivating critical thinking among audiences about their everyday exposure to mass media, news, and popular culture has been theoretically significant in the works of intellectuals such as Dewey (1916, 1927), Freinet (1946), Laporta (1957), Gerbner (1959, 1963a, 1963b), Hall and Whannel (1964), Eco (1964), McLuhan (1964), Horkheimer and Adorno (1969), Althusser (1970), Freire (1971), Baacke (1973), Porcher (1974), Postman (1979), and so on. However, what we should note is that both scholars and practitioners did not have a common set of theories, as they were fractionalized among different theoretical roots and disciplinary perspectives: Marxian and neo-Marxian sociology of culture, activism in education, history of communication and culture, critical pedagogy, educational theory, empiricism, etc.

The new millennium has increased consciousness of the public's role in a mediated society, and with the complicity of political, cultural, and educational organizations and the increased ease of international exchange, a shared theoretical framework for the current paradigm is emerging. In order to summarize the main principles underlying the contemporary media literacy education theory and practice, we identify four main points.

First of all, a more coherent perception of media technology as *a dimension of the social environment* is a good sign of development in the media literacy education field. Now, we share a less adversarial understanding of the media because we have moved beyond two different powerful but limiting conceptions from early theories of communication. On one hand, we have recovered from the mechanistic idea of the bullet theory (Lasswell 1927) that made us see media as powerful tools that enter our minds to automatically produce bad effects (such as giving us corrupt values or violent behaviors), and damage cognitive skills. On the other hand, we also got over the Marxian idea of the media system as a superstructure aimed at creating and imposing role models, needs, and outlooks to the lower class in order for capitalists to maintain economic control; this conception made us think that “mass”-media limit freedom and social justice and that people had to combat them. Because of these theories, we had—and still have sometimes—a censorial approach aimed at protecting children from the media influence

(insisting on TV and internet rating systems, V-chip, parental control software, etc.), and the so-called “inoculation approach” of media education (Halloran and Jones 1992).

Today, we have gained a balance between protection and empowerment approaches to media literacy education. We recognize that children and youth need to understand the media to discern and use visual and interactive languages as well as the alphabetical ones, to develop critical thinking skills on media representation of world and on mediated interactions, to communicate ideas in different formats, and to be responsible for what they do with technology as users and communicators themselves. In one word, we all agree that people and communities really grow up in the media environment in which participatory cultures shape the set of skills and competencies that we need.

Despite the different words we use to name our field (e.g. media education, media literacy, digital literacy, media literacy education, etc.), a second common ground of the current paradigm is the concept of expanded literacy (Felini 2008; Hobbs 2006). We observed in the past two or three decades the progressive shift from a notion of literacy as strictly related to alphabetic and written texts to another notion related to all kind of texts, considered from a communicative point of view; in this way, the unifying elements of our concern are that of audience, authorship, message, meaning, representation, language, etc. This move—made possible by linguistics and semiotics (e.g. Barthes 1957; Eco 1975)—is not just a different approach in media studies: it was a strategy we used to make media literacy education land in a variety of school and educational settings. In fact, the political accent we put in the '60s and '70s on critical thinking and on mass media ideology made the admission of media literacy education into school very difficult because many people perceived those goals as unrelated to the duties of school systems. On the contrary, teaching literacy has always been considered one of the primary tasks for educators, and if media are embedded deeply in the concept of literacy, nobody can quarrel if someone teaches about the languages, technologies, and representational systems of the media at school. However, in this way, some of the critical perspective and political power of media education was lost. The critical and revolutionary strength of these ideas was perhaps bartered in order to deepen the reach of media

literacy education into existing social institutions. This is another way to conceptualize what “normal science” means in our area nowadays.

In many countries of the world, the school’s and educational center’s gates are now flung wide open to embrace educational technology and its vision of a tool-oriented digital literacy. Governments and private organizations allocate plenty of funding for computing equipment and providing broadband access, defining the new skills we need as the ability to use a keyboard and a mouse for word processing documents and creating spreadsheets, accessing the Internet to find information, and using social media to share ideas. The third common belief we share as media literacy education scholars and practitioners is *dissatisfaction with a narrow conceptualization of digital literacy*. The conceptual separation between “old” media literacy and “new” digital literacy, which is sometimes trumpeted by scholars for rhetorical emphasis, is based in superficial arguments about children as “digital natives.” Children and teens are able by themselves to use PCs or smartphones, but they often need an adult’s help in developing second-level media skills: for example, in acquiring a reflective stance toward one’s own habits and choices regarding the use of media and technology, in critically understanding a message’s form and content, interacting with people in respectful and responsible ways, using different symbol systems to express their own ideas, etc.

Finally, we could shift to an epistemological or meta-theoretical point of view to observe *the constitution of media literacy education as a discipline*. Born at the crossroad of several scientific approaches, media literacy education is now an interdisciplinary field where sociology, education, media studies, and psychology meet, sharing conceptual frameworks, vocabulary, and research methods. This meeting is not easy because of some misunderstandings that can occur, but we are learning to take anyone’s best work: we have received a clearer understanding of media literacy education goals and practices from scholars in education and incorporated the linguistic structure of media messages from the field of semiotics. We have benefitted from understanding the media industry and the characteristics of old and new media from communication studies, and drawn from studies of children and youth culture from the field of sociology. The intelligent mix of these contributions and

disciplinary points of view is the shared knowledge that media literacy education scholars and practitioners need, use, develop, and continuously improve.

### **A Return to Foundational Questions**

Media literacy education seems now mature enough to have its own set of theories and methods, its own tradition of research and practices, and more recently, thanks also to the advent of digital literacy, its own legitimate presence in both informal and formal institutional contexts of education. The 2010 World Summit in Karlstad made this maturity quite visible. After years of disputes about definitions, traditions, disciplinary boundaries, priorities, it was indeed refreshing to see so many researchers, practitioners, educators, and teachers somehow convene on the fundamental interdisciplinary nature of the movement as a source of great strength as well as the shared theoretical framework for the current paradigm. Yet, we need to be aware that this paradigmatic settlement may bring forth— as it is often the case with the *disciplining* of a field— a risk of de-politicizing and under-theorizing media literacy education. This may lead to uncritical celebration of consumer sovereignty as well as a proliferation of policy agendas on digital skills as ready-made expertise for the job market, all offered in exchange for the legitimation of media literacy education within institutional settings (schools *in primis*).

Precisely at the very moment when the field seems to be reaching its status as a normal science, we need to hold tight to a notion of media literacy education as a force for strengthening civic imagination and expanding democratic life in the mediated public sphere (Thompson 1995). As such, it may effectively counteract the current consumerist, instrumentalist, and administrative ideologies, hooked on a language claiming the cost-effectiveness of digital assessments of students’ and teachers’ performance, a language that downsizes schools to mere factories to train a digitally-skilled work force and commodifies knowledge behind a pseudo-progressive discourse of student-centeredness and creativity, of digital empowerment, job standardization, professionalization, and meritocracy. Of the many developments in recent educational and media research that may lead to this depoliticization/undertheorization of media literacy education, two are particularly significant here: the discovery of the “active” audience and the rapid expansion of digital media in educational contexts.

*Neither passive, nor active.* Media literacy educators have long since abandoned the notion of a passive child audience in favour of a more active one based on three evidence-based facts: (1) children's decoding of media texts is quite complex, diversified, and subjective; (2) they need to be listened to in their own terms rather than judged for their inability to use or understand the media in appropriately adult ways; (3) children's uses of the media must be situated within the broader context of their own family, social, and interpersonal relationships. Despite the important positive consequences of this notion on the work of media literacy educators, it has also quite problematic aspects (Buckingham 2000). To argue that children are active meaning-makers does not necessarily imply that the media cannot influence them! Although they do know a lot about the media, there still remain many areas they need to know more about. Similarly, the idea that we should try to make sense of children's media experiences in their own terms (adopting an ethnographic approach rather than simply rely on social statistics) can lead media literacy educators to a romantic view of children's experience based on the naïve assumption that they are an authentic and transparent source of meaning and creativity. According to this view, the analyst/teacher/educator just needs to give them a voice and let them "freely" express themselves, either verbally or through self-made media productions.

In fact, we should transcend the mere phenomenological level of expressive behavior and connect it with the broader macro-social context. There is a real need to pay attention to the social context of childhood and adolescence in relation to media experience: once again, this attention is often superficially developed in terms of empirical and theoretical research, resting on the mere level of *description* with no capacity nor will to *explain* how context actually affects children's media experience.<sup>2</sup>

*Beyond techno-utopianism.* As for the rapid expansion of digital media in educational contexts, by re-invigorating the political and theoretical vein of media literacy education we can better find ways to criticize the techno-utopist drift inspiring it. The current formulation of digital literacy explicitly brackets out the historical dimension of digital innovation by abstractly identifying it with social change and modernization, glossing over the conditions, the conjunctures and the

interests that have led to certain innovations rather than others. Educators, policy makers, media executives and the like do not seem interested in recognizing that in fact in the age of informationalism (Castells 2001), the crucial factor is no longer information per se (nor the mere access to it), but rather the *intellectual capacity to select and process it*. Adopting a vocational and instrumental vulgate of the concept of digital citizenship (according to which the priority is to "supply" students with the technical skills to succeed in the job market and access the goods and services offered by the state/market), some thought leaders tend to celebrate digital media as thaumaturgical tools for improving education. Yet, as Castells quite convincingly reminds us, "for all the ideology of the potential of new communication technologies in education, health, and cultural enhancement, the prevailing strategy aims at developing a giant electronic entertainment system, considered the safest investment from a business perspective. Thus, while governments and futurologists speak of wiring classrooms, doing surgery at a distance, and tele-consulting the Encyclopedia Britannica, most of the actual construction of the new systems focuses on "video-on-demand", tele-gambling, and virtual reality theme parks" (Castells 2001, 318).

In both cases—the celebration of the "active" audience and the techno-utopist promises of digital media—the historical determinants and the political/economic context affecting media usage and development are completely bracketed out. This may ultimately contribute to a schism between theory and practice, between the macro-level (media as social institutions structuring social action) and the micro-level (media as material and symbolic resources to be used in everyday life and in the classroom). Therefore, media literacy educators must examine these questions: How do we reconnect the macro with the micro? How do we take full advantage of the digital media's potential for education without thinking that it is simply a question of having a material access to technology, of cabling all schools and giving each student a laptop? How do we make students interact more (self-) reflexively with media, learning to acquire, select, process, and create information on their own, generating critical knowledge, playing an active and poetic role in the construction of reality, triggering a self-reflexive process of social inclusion and cohesion? How do we

<sup>2</sup> An interesting exception is the extensive and well-designed research study currently being conducted by Sonia Livingstone and Leslie Hadden on European children's uses of the internet both in terms of risks and opportunities [for details and downloads see [www.eukidsonline.it](http://www.eukidsonline.it)].

hold tight to a critical media literacy education (in the Frankfurtian sense) without falling into the traps of economic and ideological reductionism? We propose three interconnected directions should be followed:

*Continue to emphasize critical reading of the media but always in connection with the students' lived media experience.* In the critical media literacy education classroom the realm of self-reflection about one's own media use habits and popular culture tastes, together with media production experiences (where students' can live out *practically* their subjective experience) must be inextricably interwoven with a *theoretical* understanding of media as cultural-social-economic institutions. This integration bridges the distance between students' experience and more abstract ideas, offering them a means of exploring media as machineries of power that simultaneously operate at the level of production— as *material and ideological apparatus* that create cultural commodities under certain contextual conditions— and at the level of consumption— as *social catalysers* that trigger processes of collective interaction and active subjectivity within diversified lived experiences. Students need to engage media representations (and the social practices they originate in their everyday life) as *discourses* (i.e. textual constructions embodied in and circulated by non discursive material forces, as Foucault would say) that set the boundaries of how people behave and see themselves/reality/others. While going back to the traditional “demystifying” principle of media literacy education, we definitely need to integrate it with a subtler look at how these discourses are mobilized in everyday life. If media literacy education is to make a real difference to students' eyes, it needs to establish a strong connection between critical analysis and those media practices where they mostly commit their passion and energy. Indeed, learning has to be meaningful to students in their own terms before it can become critical. Therefore, their media use habits, taste preferences, and lived experiences do become a legitimate object of interest in the media literacy education classroom, yet they must be also critically interrogated (not stigmatized) and used as a resource to make sense of broader modes of knowledge and social structuring. To put it shortly, when media lived experiences are evoked in the media literacy education classroom, we take “a detour through theory” (as Marx would say) and insert them within a process of self-reflection and critique in order for them to become an effective transformative pedagogical resource.

*Bring pleasure into the classroom and develop a practice of affective reflexivity.* By inserting media lived experience as a legitimate object of study, media literacy educators ultimately address the complex intersection between ideology, pleasure, and sociality, knowing in advance that in fact youth's everyday engagement with the media is first and foremost defined (if not determined) by affective and socializing investments, apart from (and quite often despite) meaning. Most of the time, media consumption activities are deeply connecting to the pursuit of hobbies and sports, chatting and instant messaging friends, playing games, e-shopping and downloading pop music and movies, as well as enthusiasm for soap operas, reality television shows, pop music celebrities, etc. The recognition of pleasure as an important interpretative category for social action reverses a long-long standing assumption in modern epistemologies based on the Cartesian mind/body split, according to which the production/consumption of culture necessarily and exclusively implies a process of ideological signification and interpretation. We now have come to recognize that media popularity does not lie in its ideological effects, but mostly in the consumerist production of pleasure. As Silverstone (1999) suggests, pleasure is a central dimension in media consumption: the non-rational, the bodily, the erotic, profusely offered by the media, provides an important arena where the boundaries and tensions between seriousness and play, fiction and reality, social roles and subjectivities may be blurred, if only temporarily. Yet, pleasure is also inextricably connected with access, social control, and power. As such, it is both self-determined and “manufactured.” That helps to explain why individuals engage in contradictory activities, appearing to consent to dominant practices while at the same time resisting them— more or less consciously and radically— through appropriating/negotiating/subverting *tactics* (in de Certeau's sense) so that they can better cope with their everyday life's desires, contradictions, frustrations, and problems.

The recognition of pleasure as an important interpretative category for social action reverberates into the educational field contributing to the questioning of the supremacy of the rational dimension of learning (based on logical reasoning) and the parallel confinement of its affective dimension (based on play, pleasure, and the body) to the early years of schooling, to certain disciplines (art, music, or physical education), to the minutes of recess time, to laboratory activities. By integrating critical analysis and lived media experience

through practical work in the classroom, students can investigate the affective/pleasurable side of their media consumption and at the same time learn how to question it.

If critical analysis taken in isolation amounts to mere academicism, practical activity taken in isolation may result in a mere self-referential, subjective play, i.e. a kind of unproblematic creativity emanating from an “authentic” self who finds “free” expression in classroom media productions. This idealist/individualist notion of creativity is as influential as it is problematic, especially in educational settings, since it implies and evokes an innate talent that people possess by birth and that cannot be socialized, taught and learnt, analysed, assessed, or evaluated. Developing a practice of *affective reflexivity* in the classroom (Cappello 2009) means to question this notion by engaging students’ media experience as a legitimate source of pleasure and subjective empowerment, while also learning how it is inevitably “manufactured” by certain discourses and conditions of possibility. Moreover, students can have the chance to experience the *social* dimension of creativity since they must learn to work in team, share and negotiate hypothesis, choices and solutions, imagine and arrange settings, plots, dialogues, and characters.

*Empower the media literacy educator as a scaffolder of learning.* What is the role of the media literacy educator throughout this process? In a way s/he must learn to step back and cede to students part of her/his authority and control, both because they frequently have far larger technical skills and also because affective reflexivity is precisely about students experiencing in their own terms critical thinking and creativity. Although this may appear as a form of relinquishing authority, it is in fact a way to radically redefine it, concentrating on its mediating *scaffolding* function. Crucially, it is still up to teachers to orchestrate classroom activities so that students have equal opportunities (both material and cognitive) to access technology. It is still their task to help them set their own targets, resolve disputes, allocate and manage responsibilities and resources, conduct an effective intra and inter-group communication, work within the deadlines, etc. But most of all, it is still up to teachers to integrate production/practical work with the broader pedagogical and critical questions the activity is intended to explore (again, bridging the micro and the macro). While “having fun” with authoring their own productions, students are encouraged to distance themselves from them, to evaluate them critically, to

reflect upon their consequences. As such, they will ultimately develop meta-cognitive self-reflection and a systematic capacity to *read* the media, *write* (with) the media, and also the ability to *meta-reflect* on the processes of reading and writing *per se* in order to understand and analyse their own experience as readers and writers. As a consequence, students build a more self-reflexive attitude towards their own media preferences, to understand more critically how the media products and practices they so passionately invest in are in fact the result of complex economic, social, and cultural processes that resonate in their daily lives defining and organizing them in a certain manner. That is, ultimately, what (media literacy) education is all about: students reaching their own conclusions on a certain issue by going through a process of deconstruction/reconstruction of knowledge, learning and social action, a process constantly and thoughtfully scaffolded by the crucial, authoritative (never authoritarian), intervention of the teacher in the classroom so that they learn to situate their media experiences within wider social and cultural contexts.

### Conclusion

Today, scholarship and practice in media literacy education is developing signs of “normality” in both the Kuhnian sense of the word as well as in the increasingly global communication environment that is helping advance the field of media literacy education internationally. The world community of media literacy scholars and practitioners is discovering its fundamental global and interdisciplinary nature as a source of great strength. At Karlstad, there was evidence of deep appreciation of diverse approaches to media literacy education and multiple epistemologies for advancing new knowledge in the field. We’re grateful to the conference organizers and our Scandinavian hosts for helping to advance the field through productive conferences like the World Summit on Children and Media in Karlstad. The papers in the special joint issue reflect the diversity of research paradigms and methods now emerging globally, as scientific communities from a variety of disciplines contribute to a robust dialogue. As we can see with the contributors to this volume, when the case study method is used with integrity, it supports the development of reflective practitioners as well as creating new knowledge about best practices. We are particularly impressed with the quality of work coming from the next generation—the newest crop of young scholars who bring important fresh perspectives to the

work and who do not feel bounded by the disciplinary or institutional divides that the older generation upholds. In this volume, we see new forms of inquiry under development by new scholars and practitioners. As demonstrated by this first-ever joint special issue,

we anticipate that increased opportunities for cross-national sharing among media literacy educators and scholars will continue to advance the field in the years ahead.

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