Literacy, Media Literacy and Social Change. Where Do We Go From Now?

*Gianna Cappello**

Author information

*Department of Cultures and Society, University of Palermo, Italy.

Contact author's email address

*gianna.cappello@unipa.it

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Abstract: Over the years research on literacy has progressively moved away from a narrow definition of the term in strictly psycholinguistic terms expanding it so as to recognize its inevitable embeddedness within particular social relationships and practices. In this paper, after a short historical overview of the scientific debate developed around this expanding notion of literacy, we are going to focus on the role media technologies have played in accelerating this expansion towards media literacy. To be media literate today means to be able to cope efficiently with the flood of information in contemporary highly mediated societies and act as critical, creative and responsible digital citizens. Eventually, we are going to question the techno-utopist and instrumentalist drift that often inspires the adoption of media technologies in educational contexts, and make some short conclusive re-marks on the risks and limits of the recent media literacy policy agendas as developed by public authorities and private companies.

Keywords: media literacy, digital citizenship, techno-utopism, policy agendas

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[*] Department of Cultures and Society, University of Palermo, Italy. E-mail: gianna.cappello@unipa.it

Introduction

For at least two centuries, modern society has seen a gradual development in literacy, both in terms of quantity (as access by more and more numerous and diverse groups of the population) and quality (as growth and differentiation of its areas of knowledge and action, as well as the social actors and contexts involved). In the course of this development, it has become clear that the concept of literacy, far from being a universalistic one, is in fact the result of a complex process of social construction variably related to different national contexts, institutional settings and agendas, scientific debates, public discourses and dominant ideologies.

In other words, although the traditional notion of literacy as the ability to read and write is still important and useful, it has broadened its meaning in order to include a more sociocultural and political perspective. While earlier psychological approaches conceived of literacy as the individual process of acquiring particular behaviours, cognitive and linguistic skills, more recent positions from ethnography, cultural studies, media studies, feminist theory have argued that literacy is not a *neutral skill* to be learned, but a *situated social practice*. As such, it is best understood in the larger context of institutions, practices and social actors belonging not only to school but also to the home, the community, society at large. Only by looking closely at the complex intertwine of the different literacy practices enacted within families, communities, and schools we can gain significant insights about the ways in which people learn, teach, negotiate, struggle over, and access literacy. In particular, as we shall see, changes in the contemporary mediascapes are altering our understanding of literacy, requiring new habits of mind as well as new ways of processing culture and reality.

In this paper, after a short historical overview of the scientific debate developed in the last fitfy years or so around the expanding notion of literacy, we are going to focus on the role media technologies have played in accelerating this expansion in terms of *audiovisual literacy*, *media literacy*, *media literacy education*, *digital literacy*, *information literacy*, and so on[1]. Eventually, we are going to question the techno-utopist and instrumentalist drift that often inspires the adoption of media technologies in educational contexts. Far from being thaumaturgical tools for innovating learning/teaching processes or neutral vehicles of information, media

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[1] From now on, we are using the generic term "media literacy".

technologies must be historicized as social institutions that "orient" social life as well as the ways in which people relate to reality, to themselves, to other people. Therefore, being media literate today does not merely amount to access and use some technical infrastructure, service or device. Although access and use are important preconditions that cannot be taken for granted (as the data about the global digital divide persistently show), we need to shift the focus of the debate from questions of *instrumental* access to those of *qualified* access in terms of the critical, creative and cultural competence needed for full and active involvement in contemporary media-saturated society. That requires, as our final argument goes, the expansion of public policies to support media literacy and at the same time a deeper analysis of the social, economic, institutional and technological conditions that may promote or else hinder the development of media literacy.

Mapping the notion of literacy

From the second half of the past century the debate about the concept of literacy has developed around two major schools of thought that schematically define literacy as either a "set of cognitive skills" or a "situated social practice" (Street, 2003)[2].

In the first instance, literacy develops a set of psycholinguistic skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) that produce important consequences both at individual and macro-social level. The invention of writing brings to logic and syllogistic forms of thought as well as to more general socio-economic, cultural and political developments in the whole society (Goody, 1963; Goody and Watt, 1963; Havelock, 1963, 1986; Ong, 1982). In this view, the transition from oral culture to written culture, from pre-literate to post-literate civilization, marks what has been called the "great divide" (Scribner & Cole, 1981), i.e. the gap between societies and cultures that develop certain skills cognitive of "higher order" and those who still do not enjoy this privilege. This model of literacy, long adopted in schools as well as in the development programs such as UNESCO's, lies on the assumption that the acquisition of literacy brings *per se* to the cognitive, social, economic and cultural growth of disadvantaged illiterate persons, be they living in the Third

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[2] To be more precise, Street refers to these two notions as, respectively, the "autonomous" and "ideological" model of literacy.

World, in the poorest rural regions, or in the slums of the big metropolitan areas. Building on a functionalist vision of society, it assumes that individuals, entering the institutional settings where literacy is imparted, acquire cognitive skills as well as an entire set of values, norms and behaviors that favor inclusion, development and social mobility. As a result of this view, school has come to establish itself as the formal educational institution *par excellence*, charged with the task to produce certain cognitive skills through the achievement of a series of formalized, measurable, standardized, transferable, and therefore "universal" learning objectives, on the one hand, and to respond to individual and social expectations of promotion and mobility for the acquisition of better social and professional position, on the other one (Paci, 1973).

In the late '70s, however, this model is in crisis and a new notion of literacy as "situated practice" arises. The increase in school enrollment rates and the expansion of qualifications produce an inflationing of education credentials and a fall of the social mobility expectations they had supported until then. The concept of literacy underlying this model proves ideologically oriented and not equipped to deal with the diversity and complexity of a society rapidly changing, both socially and culturally[3]. The equation between education and school is no longer "functional" to the development of society and the need for de-schooling society (Illich, 1971) and a new educational polycentrism (Cesareo, 1974) emerge. Far from being an independent and ideologically neutral variable, as scholars from the *New Literacies Studies* (NLS) argue[4], literacy is now seen as embedded in the specific contextual conditions under which it is defined, institutionalized and practiced. Its consequences – be they cognitive, economic, social or democratic – are always-already conditioned by the power relations predominating at a particular moment in time. Far from being a psychological ability that has to do with people's "head", literacy has to do with social, institutional, and cultural relationships.

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[3] In the late '70s, Harvey J. Graff (1979) speaks of literacy as a *myth*, i.e. an ideological construct on which Western society has historically based its supremacy making literacy invariably stand for progress, economic development and social advancement, and the opposite – illiteracy – for ignorance, darkness and underdevelopment.
[4] See: Gee 1999, 2004, 2010; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Hamilton, 2012; Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Appleby & Hamilton, 2005; Besnier, 1995, Street, 2003; Kress, 2003.

Building on this culturalist/situated notion of literacy, a further broadening of the term has emerged with the advent of the media technologies, as we shall see in the next paragraph.

Media literacy for building citizenship and promoting participation

In recent times, the broadening of the notion of literacy has been accelerated by the impact of media technologies in people's everyday life producing a field of study and intervention that can be broadly named *media literacy*.

What does being "media literate" mean? Media literacy scholars and practitioners have differently answered this question over the years and across different national contexts[5]. In quite general terms, we can say that initially a "protectionist" approach dominated according to which media literacy was to protect young people from the negative effects of mass media (violent behaviours, ideological manipulation, social isolation, consumerism, etc.). Eventually a more "dialogical" approach emerged, more interested in understanding (rather than condemning) the multiple ways in which young people adopt, make use of and interpret the media in their everyday life. Since then, media literacy has taken up the task to help students to "reflect on their own activity both as 'readers' and 'writers' of media texts, and understand the broader social and economic factors that are in play" (Buckingham, 2003, p. 14).

In 2009, the European Charter for Media Literacy[6] proposes a very comprehensive definition of media literacy as the ability to
- use media technologies effectively to access, store, retrieve and share content to meet their individual and community needs and interests;
- gain access to, and make informed choices about, a wide range of media forms and content from different cultural and institutional sources;
- understand how and why media content is produced;

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[5] For further readings on the history and development of media literacy, see Masterman, 1985; Rivoltella, 2001; Buckingham, 2003, 2007; Cappello, 2009, 2012; Jenkins, 2009; Hobbs & Jensen, 2009; Hobbs, 1998, 2010; Aroldi, 2010; Cappello & Ranieri, 2010; Cappello, Felini & Hobbs, 2010; Potter, 2014. See also European Commission 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009; EU High-Level Expert Group 2012.
[6] Available at: http://www.euromedialiteracy.eu/charter.php?id=3 (accessed February 2017).

- analyse critically the techniques, languages and conventions used by the media, and the messages they convey;
- use media creatively to express and communicate ideas, information and opinions;
- identify, and avoid or challenge, media content and services that may be unsolicited, offensive or harmful;
- make effective use of media in the exercise of their democratic rights and civic responsibilities.

From this definition, it is clear that media literacy, far from being a mere technical skill, stands for the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create content, in whatever form it comes (Aufderheide, 1993).

Even simply accessing the media is more complicated than usually thought as it implies the capacity to select, within the huge flood of information we are daily confronted with, which specific services and/or content we need and integrate them in a significant way in our everyday life. As such, access requires a kind of economic, social, cultural and cognitive capital that may be unevenly distributed among people, hence the importance of media literacy to counteract the effects of social stratification.

Media literacy also implies some analytical competence in order to make sense of how the media function at a production level as an economic-industrial apparatus having certain interests and constraints; how they make sense of reality representing it according to a certain logic of exclusion/inclusion/stereotyping; how they convey meaning using certain codes and conventions, i.e. a specific audiovisual grammar that needs to decoded in its own terms; finally, how they address certain social categories as audience in order to maximise profit (Buckingham, 2003).

In other words, media literacy is about critical evaluation, about "demystifying" media messages in order to counteract their manipulative and ideological effects. Even more so with digital media, if we think that the Internet has undeniably made information more accessible, less centralized, even "alternative" to mainstream media, and yet equally questionable in terms of reliability and ideological orientation. Media literacy is also about producing and sharing media content in a responsible manner through the innumerable platforms and services of the cyberspace.

Given this definition of media literacy, can we say that people, especially the young, are media literate? Supporters of the digital natives thesis (Prensky, 2001) would probably argue that children simply acquire these skills on their own, without any adult intervention or supervision.

Undeniably, they know a lot more about digital media environments than most parents and teachers. Yet, they still need to be engaged in a critical dialogue with their media experiences so that they can articulate more responsibly and consciously their intuitive understandings of these experiences. As Henry Jenkins quite convincingly argues (2009), media literacy must counteract the laissez faire attitude that brings the digital natives thesis to ignores or skip over three "core problems". The first one is the *participation gap*, i.e. the fact that young people's access to new media is unevenly distributed and so is their possibility to share the opportunities they offer, as the persistence of the digital divide show (Van Dijk, 2012, Hargittai 2007, 2008a, 2008b). Therefore, we need to make sure that they have access not only to the "machine" but more importantly to the skills and experiences needed to become full and responsible participants in the social contexts they live in. The second one is the *transparency problem*, i.e. the assumption that they are already capable of reflecting on their media experiences articulating critically their understandings of how the media shape their perceptions of the world. The third one is the *ethics challenge*, i.e. the assumption that young people can develop and apply some ethical norms and standards to orient responsibly their practices as media makers and as participants in online communities.

The digital natives myth (and the urge for media literacy that it calls for) are part of a more general discourse – a kind of techno-utopism, as we shall call it in the next paragraph – which tends to celebrate the improvements and advancements of technological innovation, superficially identifying it with social progress.

Beyond techno-utopism. The risks and limits of the instrumentalist vision

In the last decades, the discourses of scholars from different backgrounds, politicians, media professionals and public opinion as a whole have increasingly referred to the advent of the "network society", the "age of information and communication", the "knowledge society". These discourses often adopt the visionary stance of a techno-utopism, which brackets out the historical dimension of technological innovation, *abstractly* identifying it with social change and "modernization", glossing over the conditions, the conjunctures, the specific uses and interests, which *concretely*

lead to certain technological innovations rather than others. In other words, we are faced with a sort of technological fatalism generated by an "e-deology" (De Biase, 2003) that, while promising progress and wellbeing for everybody, in fact confines the debate into a self-evident perspective: the genealogy of technogical innovation (in Foucault's sense) remains for most people irrelevant, if not a mystery to be accepted with trust and faith like the benevolent arrival of an alien coming from another galaxy. It is no accident that Margaret Thatcher in 1982, in a speech given during an important conference on Information Technology (IT), defined it as "a friend; it helps us; we should welcome it; we should treat it as an ET rather than IT" (in Robins & Webster, 1999, p. 74).

So de-historicized, technological innovation is portrayed merely as an "instrument" endowed with a *telos* of its own offering friendly interfaces and services that people are made to perceive as unproblematic, un-mediated, and neutral. Apparently, however, that is not the case. As Melvin Kranzberg's "laws" about technological history state, "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral. Although technology might be a prime element in many public issues, nontechnical factors take precedence in technology-policy decisions. Technology is a very human activity – and so is the history of technology" (Kranzberg, 1986, p. 544). In other words, Kranzberg argues that all technological systems are the result of some historical process. Digital media, including the Internet, are no exception. The adoption of a genealogical perspective contributes to historicizing technology and situating its developments within specific contextual conditions such as, for example, the pervasive control that profit-oriented interests are increasingly gaining on the Internet, as Manuel Castells acutely pointed out back in 2001, "While governments and futurologists speak 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" (Castells, 2001, p. 366).

In fact a paradoxical situation seems to emerge by which the more knowledge and information qualify social action and interaction, the more people depend on digital expert systems for developing their life projects; the more these systems (and the material and symbolical resources they provide) become crucial for people's everyday life, the more accessing them becomes complex, socially stratified, and bound to conditions which escape people's control and understanding (Cappello & Fici, 2008). In other words,

just when media technologies seem to allow people to construct and express their identity and social-cultural universes in the utmost personalized and self-reflexive way, in fact a stricter relationship of dependence ties them up to media systems on which most of the people have little control. "In this respect – as quite convincingly John B. Thompson argues – reflexivity and dependency are not necessarily opposed to one another" (Thompson, 1995, p. 214). Therefore, on the one hand, the horizontality of *personal* media (unknown to *mass* media, typically monodirectional) tends to blur the difference between producers and consumers expanding people's opportunities to access multiple sources of information as well as create and share their own content. On the other hand, however, new forms of mediation, filtering and unidirectionality are emerging. In a way, it is as if the Internet is moving from *direct interaction* to *direct intermediation*, so that "although [people] have the chance to do basically anything on the internet (…), [they], overwhelmed by information, will tend to delegate their "power" to others: to browers increasingly powerful which will select information according to criteria which might not be so clear; and to brokers who will process and edit it in an increasingly pleasurable way" (De Rosa, 2000, p. 193).

This techno-utopist drift is apparent also in the education field. Many researchers, policy makers, teachers, and parents have come to believe that digital media and the Internet offer *per se* new and more empowering possibilities[7]. Adopting a vocational and instrumentalist vulgate of the "digital school" (according to which its first 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), they tend to celebrate digital media as thaumaturgical tools for improving teaching and learning processes relinquishing the crucial role schools have always played as critical mediators between knowledge, power and society. This drift feeds into a consumerist, instrumentalist and administrative ideology, hooked on a language claiming the cost-effectiveness of the digital assessments of students' and teachers' performance, downsizing schools to mere factories

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[7] Despite all current and investments for the digital school, we still need more empirical research to prove if and how media technologies improve teaching and learning processes. For an extensive literature review and a critique of technocentric rethoric, especially in the educational field, see Ranieri, 2011. See also, Livingstone, 2009 and Buckingham, 2007, 2013.

to train a digitally skilled work force, commodifying knowledge behind a pseudo-progressive discourse of student-centeredness and creativity, of digital empowerment, job standardization, professionalization, and meritocracy. Some even venture to foresee the vanishing of all formal education in favor of some sort of self and/or collaborative online learning (promptly satisfied by the market).

In other words, there seems to dominate an *instrumental progressivism* (Robins & Webster, 1999) that rejects traditional practices and approaches on behalf of a superficial experimentalism for its own sake, devoid of any socio-pedagogical vision and inclined to collapse innovation with mere adoption and technological infrastructuring, failing to recognize that media technologies do not merely *transmit* information or knowledge, but in fact *construct* it.

In sum, the genealogical deconstruction of technological innovation and the questioning of instrumental progressivism call for a redefinition of access as *qualified* access (Cappello, 2012), given that in the age of *informationalism* (Castells, 2001), the crucial factor is no longer information in and of itself (nor the mere access to it), but rather the intellectual capacity to select and process it in a critical, creative and responsible way turning it into significant knowledge and active participation. In fact, qualified access (and ultimately, media literacy) nurtures digital citenzeship today and as such it should a universal right of its own. More precisely, we could say that the first basic (passive) right to access digital media must necessarily go along with the more complex (active) right to be able to intervene competently in the contemporary digital public sphere.

To conclude… where do we go from now?

Digital technology has increasingly attracted a remarkable general attention that has certainly contributed to legitimate and reinforce media literacy in schools and other educational settings. Yet, a series of risks and concerns must be considered. The first risk, as already mentioned, is the affirmation of a narrow conceptualization of media literacy as a mere technical/instrumental capacity to use digital media devices and services, diluting its "political" dimension as a force for strengthening civic imagination and expanding democratic life in digital public sphere in exchange for its legitimation in institutional settings, such as schools.

But there is another, even subtler, risk similarly related to the current huge funding and support provided by governments as well as private media companies. As said, media literacy is (and has always been) about making people develop critical thinking skills in order to self-govern their uses and consumption of the media. It is about making them responsible in using the media. But then, if they become media literate, why should we still regulate the field in order to protect them? If they know how to protect themselves from the risks and harms of the media, how to communicate, create and share content in a responsible manner, why do we need to put pressure on both private companies and public authorities to regulate the field?

Paradoxically, the current neo-liberal hype on media literacy is producing two unintended, "perverse effects" (Boudon, 1982) calling for deregulating the field and give more space to the self-regulatory wisdom of the market, on the one hand, and for mobilizing individual responsibility (be it that of children, parents, educators or teachers, etc.), on the other one. If some online misbehaviour happens, it because people have not engaged themselves enough with the media literacy programs provided by public authorities and/or media companies. As Sonia Livingstone quite convincigly argues, "The critical observer is posed with something of a dilemma. One would surely wish to support the individual empowerment and the investment in education awareness that the promotion of media literacy promises. Yet, at the same time, these moves must be recognized as part of a broader shift from direct control by government to governance through 'action at a distance' – regulating parents, for example, through discursively established norms of 'good parenting'." (Livingstone, 2009, pp. 204-205). Indeed, too much of a burden to be borne by single individuals, given also that it weighs differently among different social strata.

Given this dilemma, three general and closely intertwined conclusive processes must be taken into account when it comes to design and implement any future research, policy or initiative about media literacy: 1) the historical developments of media technologies as a process of co-determination between society and technology; 2) the ways in which individuals adopt and adapt media technologies in their daily lives within conditions of possibility that are always socially stratified; 3) the timely and attentive commitment of public institutions (governments, regulatory bodies, schools, civil society actors) to ensure that the promotion of media literacy on a mass level does not result in the legitimation of the most unbridled economic and market liberalism.

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