

A PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL TELEMEDIA COUNCIL

THE JOURNAL OF  
**MEDIA LITERACY**

VOLUME 64, NUMBERS 1 & 2 \* 2017



GUEST EDITORS

NEIL ANDERSEN • CAROL ARCUS

# THE JOURNAL OF MEDIA LITERACY

National Telemedia Council, Inc.

1922 University Avenue • Madison, WI 53726  
(608) 218-1182 • NTelemedia@aol.com  
www.NationalTelemediaCouncil.org

**www.JournalofMediaLiteracy.org**

## EDITORIAL BOARD

EDITOR

**Marieli Rowe**

GUEST EDITORS

**Neil Andersen and Carol Arcus**

MEMBERS

**Karen Ambrosh**

**Neil Andersen**

**Belinha De Abreu**

**Henry Jenkins**

**Joanna Overn**

**Martin Rayala**

Copyright © 2017 National Telemedia Council, Inc.  
Reprints by permission only. ISSN: 1944-4982

## CREDITS

Visuals within each article were provided by the respective authors or are property of NTC. Some images and photographs used herein have been found on the Internet and are used here under Fair Use Guidelines and are intended for educational purposes only.

**COVER DESIGN BY MELLIA BLOOMER,  
WEXFORD COLLEGIATE SCHOOL FOR THE ARTS**

## ABOUT THE JOURNAL OF MEDIA LITERACY

*The Journal of Media Literacy* (first published in 1953 as Better Broadcasts News and later as *Telemedium*, *The Journal of Media Literacy*) is published by the National Telemedia Council (NTC), the oldest ongoing media literacy education organization in the United States, having been founded in 1953. The editors invite special guest editors for particular issues of the *Journal*.

*The Journal of Media Literacy* reflects the philosophy of NTC, which takes a positive, non-judgmental approach to media literacy education as an essential life skill for the 21st Century. The National Telemedia Council is an organization of diverse professionals interested in the field of media literacy education. NTC encourages free expression of views on all aspects of media literacy in order to encourage learning and increase growth of understanding of issues in Media Literacy. Any opinions expressed in *The Journal* or by individual members of NTC, therefore, do not necessarily represent policies or positions of the National Telemedia Council.

# Agency

**From the Editors**

*Marieli Rowe and Karen Ambrosh, Neil Andersen and Carol Arcus* ..... 2

**Henry Jenkins interviewed by Neil Andersen**

*By Neil Andersen* ..... 4

**Media Theory 101: Agency**

*By David Buckingham* ..... 12

**Agentive Realism and Media Literacy**

*By Michael Dezuanni* ..... 16

**Media Literacy, Good Agency: If Jez We Could?**

*By Julian McDougall* ..... 20

**Media Literacy That Excludes a Planet at Risk is Not Agency**

*By Barrie Zwicker* ..... 27

**A Fresh Look at the Media Literacy Movement: The Telemedia Council as an Agent for a Better Future**

*By Marieli Rowe* ..... 34

**The Birth, Death and Resurrection of a Subject Association**

*By Robyn Quin and Barrie McMahon* ..... 40

**Towards a Rights-Based Vision of Digital Literacy**

*By Matthew Johnson* ..... 46

**Marshall McLuhan on Agency in Education and Technology Use**

*By Alex Kuskis* ..... 50

**Maneuvering Entrenched Structures of Arab Education Systems:**

**The Agency of Arab Media Literacy Educators and Activists**

*By Jad Melki and Lubna Maaliki* ..... 56

**Fostering Agency Through Media Literacy**

*By Martin Rayala* ..... 61

**Newspapers in Education: Acquiring Future Customers, or Serving Future Citizens?:**

**On the Suitability as Agency of Newspapers in Education in Japan for Promoting Media Literacy**

*By Yoshimi Uesugi* ..... 64

**Promoting Media Literacy in China: The Agency Effort**

*By Alice Y. L. Lee* ..... 70

**Producing and Building My Citizenship: Media Education and the Human Rights of Young Women**

*By Raquel Ramírez Salgado* ..... 74

**Canadian Agents**

*By Neil Andersen* ..... 80

**End User License Agreements in Plain Language**

*By Neil Andersen* ..... 86

**Barry Duncan: A Radical Agent for Media Literacy Education**

*By Carol Arcus* ..... 90

*“This time, like all times, is a very good one,  
if we but know what to do with it.”*

*—Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Vice President Joe Biden quoted Emerson in his recent eulogy for astronaut and former senator, John Glenn, to illustrate his legacy. It represents a poignant example of John Glenn’s personal agency in his extraordinary life. The urgency of our work in media literacy and the need for knowledge and action has never been more evident than today; the anxiety level of our society appears to be at an all-time high. Could it be brought on by the unprecedented experience of today’s pervasive media immersion? It is easy in *our time* for an individual to be mired in a sea of media messages, which can be like trying to navigate an ocean without a rudder. More people, of all ages, are feeling an untraceable sense of anxiety and a loss of control that can only be remedied through agency. Emerson’s words are from 1844, and yet provide a strong positive spirit across time, especially today. Knowing what to do in *our time* is media literacy in action; it is Agency.

Leave it to the Canadians to capture the essence of our time and be a true agent of change for a media-wise, literate global society. *The Journal of Media Literacy* owes a debt of gratitude to Neil Andersen and Carol Arcus for challenging us and our readers to look at what we do in media literacy education through a new lens, from a point of knowledge in action.

The contributions of our authors in this issue give us much hope and direction. They are beacons of light in the vast ocean of our media environment. We would especially like to congratulate, and to highlight the visionary work of Dr. Martin Rayala. He and Dr. Cristina Alvarez are the co-founders of the innovative Design Lab School in Delaware, which has become one of 10 schools across the country to be designated an XQ Super School, receiving \$10 million to rethink high schools for the 21st century.

The National Telemedia Council is inspired by the work of these pioneers of the future. Next year, we will be celebrating our 65th Anniversary and want to declare 2018 as our Year of Media Literacy. To prepare

for this year and potential growth and change in our organization, we are purposefully pausing production of our traditional journal for 2017. Readers can expect to receive more communication about this process throughout the year in both print and online. We thank you for your continued support and look forward to celebrating with you in our anniversary year. ✨

Marieli Rowe  
JML EDITOR

*Marieli Rowe*

Karen Ambrosh  
NTC PRESIDENT

*Karen Ambrosh*

Marieli Rowe



Karen Ambrosh



**A**gency is knowledge in action. In media literacy, agency is the exercising of awareness through critical thinking skills to effect change personally, locally and/or globally.

Agency is also a central dilemma of our evolving electronic environment. With power comes responsibility. As governments, corporations and individuals acquire increasing power over their own and others' information, ethical questions continue to raise their heads.

Governments can collect and share—without responsibility or detection—details of our online activities. Corporations can collect and sell—without remuneration or regard—details of our online activities. We, ourselves, can create and distribute powerful communications, true or false, harmless or damaging. What are the responsibilities and agencies in an environment of such surveillance and disclosure?

Marshall McLuhan observed that violence is agency—the act of someone seeking to find or establish an identity. We must acknowledge—by way of transparency and context—that the articles in this issue were written during a most violent history, specifically: bombings and shootings in northern Europe; mass drownings in the Mediterranean; a failed coup and purge in Turkey; mass shootings in America; weekly deaths of black men and women at the hands of police; the Brexit vote; civil wars in the Middle East; the hottest summer on record; and a US presidential campaign in which Donald Trump gave license to civil disobedience, xenophobia, misogyny and division. It is inevitable that these violent events influenced some of the tone and substance of the articles.

We begin the issue with big ideas. You will find some rich and provocative discussions about the potential of media literacy education—indeed its very purpose and efficacy—in promoting agency. Fundamentally, these articles ask us to consider agency's *raison d'être* and tragic flaws. The rest of the issue offers case studies of a variety of idiosyncratic meanings and

uses of agency according to cultural contexts: media literacy in action; change agents; media education in the service of democracy or human rights and as an agent for awareness in the workplace, school, and society. Other words are also employed strategically, for example: one to refine meaning (see Martin Rayala's use of 'meliorism' in "Fostering Agency Through Media Literacy") and one to characterize it (see Julian McDougall's purposeful use of 'fuck' in "Media Literacy, Good Agency: If Jez We Could?").

We are very grateful to the many thoughtful people who took the time and trouble to help us wrestle with so many critical aspects of agency and to the Journal of Media Literacy for publishing them. We hope that their thoughts and actions will support and encourage your own reflections and, If Jez We Could, your agency. ✱

Neil Andersen



Carol Arcus



# Henry Jenkins interviewed by Neil Andersen

[politics] [distributed power] [self-determination] [participatory culture] [Nelly Stromquist] [Anthony Giddens]



Henry Jenkins is the Provost's Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Art and Education at the University of Southern California and the founder and former director of the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program. He is the author/editor of more than 17 books on various aspects of media and popular culture, including most recently *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism and Participatory Culture In a Networked Era*.

If you follow Henry Jenkins' work, you probably know that the interview is his chosen media form on his personal blog [henryjenkins.org](http://henryjenkins.org). So I asked Henry if I could ironically flip him into the interviewee and ask him about agency rather than have him write. He agreed. It was fun. And very elucidating.

**N.A. A great deal—possibly all of your work—implicates agency. *Textual Poachers* explored fan agency. I often wonder if your move from MIT to USC might have been a deliberate exercise of agency. The conferences that you mount with the entertainment industry seem like another exercise of agency. Your books and your series of interviews on [henryjenkins.org](http://henryjenkins.org) seem again to be forms of agency. Is agency the foreground of your life?**

**H. J.** Before we get too deep into our discussion, it might be helpful to lay out a cluster of related concepts that are important for understanding how I think about agency. The first would be politics, which I define not simply in institutional terms (the functions of governments and nation-states) but in functional terms—the mechanisms through which human collectives determine how power, resources, and opportunities are distributed.

Politics occur at all levels where power is deployed—from the informal distribution of power at the level of the family, through the structures in the classroom which shape the relative influence of teachers, students, parents, administrators, etc., over how learning takes place, to the relations between consumers and producers or between labor and management, to the relationships of citizens and various governmental agencies, to the relationships between peoples around the world. Power, resources, and opportunities are unevenly distributed, resulting in struggles at all levels of the society.

For me then, agency has to do with issues of self-representation and self-determination within the contested political spaces that shape our everyday lives. Agency in that sense is both personal (how much control do I have over how I perceive and act upon the world) and collective (how much power do I gain by joining forces with others to pursue shared interests.) Agency is not the same thing as autonomy: we make choices in a world not of our own making and not of our own choosing. There are constraints or limits on what we can do, what we can see, what we can think, but for that very reason, it is important to recognize the freedom to think and act which we do enjoy within those constraints.

Agency is closely related to notions of voice, which Nick Couldry has defined as the capacity to construct and circulate representations of oneself that matter, that can make sense to others, and that may have consequences in terms of how they perceive you and what actions they take that impact your life. Giving voice to our concerns is one way that people exercise agency.

Participation refers to the ways people assert voice and agency in a shared social setting. Nico Carpentier has argued that participation can only occur under conditions of equality and reciprocity: participation occurs when we make collective decisions that impact our lives and where we each have an equal

share of the power to make our choices and meanings stick. I am prepared to see participation in relative rather than absolute terms. A situation may be more or less participatory, participants may have different degrees of agency, voice and influence, but our obligations as scholars and educators is to make the conditions under which we operate as transparent as possible to all parties involved.

In cultural studies, agency often exists in relation to structure: none of us, as I suggested above, have absolute autonomy. Our agency is constrained or reshaped by various systemic and structural factors in our lives. Our ability to act in the world is shaped by our access to knowledge, to a shared vocabulary through which to express our experiences, to the platforms through which we speak, to the willingness of others to listen and take seriously what it is we are trying to communicate, and so forth. Agency is impacted by structural and systemic inequalities around issues of age and generation, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and class and economic opportunity.

As a scholar, my goal is often to call attention to potentials for and limits on agency. The challenge is to take agency seriously without overstating or understating the constraints imposed upon it.

A protectionist position in media literacies often emerges from the perception that a particular group is vulnerable to media influences and needs to be protected by those in positions of power over them: so, for example, adults in relation to children. Protectionism is at heart a denial of agency. I believe a more empowering approach starts by recognizing the agency of others, the ways young people, for example, are already making meanings or asserting some degree of control over their lives. We need to overcome that initial perception of media as all-powerful and recognize strategies and tactics that enable the exercise of grassroots power in the face of corporate media. The aims of our teaching and writing should be towards helping people to recognize and exercise what agency they possess as they struggle to make meaning of media representations that impact them. I would argue that there's been an evolution in media literacy from a focus on teaching the skills of critical consumption to teaching skills of critical production to teaching skills of critical participation. Part of that evolution has been a shift in the way media gets produced, circulat-

ed, and inhabited in our era of digital transformation.

Thought of in terms of critical participation, our work as educators involves helping people to acquire the skills and resources they need to assert greater agency over their everyday lives. The choices we make about how to manage our classrooms or how to engage with other communities emerge from the assumptions we make about the amount of agency different groups enjoy and our sense that we as adult educators are entitled to be the ones who make decisions that impact the lives of others. I see media literacy as very much involved in helping people acquire and assert agency towards greater self-representation and self-determination.

*We need to overcome that initial perception of media as all-powerful and recognize strategies and tactics that enable the exercise of grassroots power in the face of corporate media.*

So, yes, the issue of agency is a central one in my work. I often speak of myself as mapping shifts towards a more participatory culture, shifts that reflect changing perceptions of our personal and collective agency and shifts in our communicative capacities — i.e., access to the means of cultural production and circulation.

You can see these questions evolving across each of my books. *Textual Poachers* was an attempt to document the kinds of everyday agency that fans exercise at a time when the public perception was that fans were couch potatoes. I saw fandom as a place where key critical conversations around media took place, where people taught each other the skills they needed to exert greater collective and personal agency over

*Protectionism is at heart a denial of agency.*

the shared cultural resources that they used to define their personal identities and imagine what kind of world they wanted to live in. *Convergence Culture* took these ideas more decisively into the digital age, asking how networked communications were changing what kinds of culture were produced and consumed and, through that, having an impact on key institutions

that shape our lives, such as education, politics, and religion. *Confronting the Challenges in a Participatory Culture*, *Reading in a Participatory Culture*, and *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* each spoke to the pedagogical implications of these core concepts, asking what kinds of skills and competencies young people need to develop in order to exert agency in this emerging model of participatory culture. *Spreadable*

*I see media literacy as very much involved in helping people acquire and assert agency towards greater self-representation and self-determination.*

*Media* asks how exerting greater control over how media circulates through our communities impacts the relationship between producers and consumers. And with my newest book, *By Any Media Necessary*, my team is asking what the implications of this expanding agency is for us as activists and citizens.

**N. A. One of your current projects is *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*. How does this project encompass and manifest agency?**

**H. J.** *By Any Media Necessary* is a deep dive into the political lives of American youth, an outgrowth of the McArthur Foundation's *Youth and Participatory Politics Network*. Altogether, my team interviewed more than 200 young activists across a range of different political movements, trying to understand the role which new media and participatory culture plays in their lives. Most writing about youth and politics is dismissive: youth come to embody all of our fears about the faltering state of American democracy—they are seen as ignorant and apathetic; they are *clicktivists* or *slacktivists* who substitute social media use for real-world protest; they are more apt to vote on *American Idol* than in the presidential election.

We found something really different: Like many of us, they are discouraged by the various ways that citizenship and government are in crisis in the United States, but they are seeking other mechanisms through which to change the world. They often are routing around the roadblocks of institutional politics in order to bring about change through educational and cultur-

al mechanisms. They certainly use social media as part of their political tactics, but they are actually tapping into a wide array of different mechanisms, depending on the resources available to them, and pursuing social justice by any media necessary. They are seeking new languages by which to express their concerns, disgusted by Washington insider-talk that is exclusive (in that it assumes people already are policy wonks) and repulsive (in that it is driven by partisan blood sports).

And in many cases, they have been effective at putting their concerns onto the national agenda. I was struck at some of the Democratic candidate forums—less so with the Republicans—by how many of the issues being discussed emerged from the agendas of the *Dreamer* movement, *#blacklivesmatter*, *Occupy Wall Street*, and a range of other youth-centered movements and networks. So, the book is cautiously optimistic about the capacity of young citizens to make a difference in the world via their emerging tactics and rhetorics.

A key concept running through the book is that of the civic imagination. Before we can change the world, we have to be able to imagine what a better world looks like. We have to envision the steps towards change, we have to imagine ourselves as political agents, and we need to be capable of empathy for people who have different experiences than our own. The functions of the civic imagination are played by different rhetorical devices at different moments or in different cultural contexts. So, for the U.S. founding fathers, a new society emerged from their fascination with classical times, and for the Civil Rights movement, the push for social justice was fueled by imagery that took shape in the pulpits of the black church. Today, young people are often drawing on images taken from popular media, which they remix and repurpose towards their own ends—*Harry Potter*, *Hunger Games*, superheroes, zombies, *Star Wars*. Even Anonymous's use of the Guy Fawkes mask is informed by *V for Vendetta* more than the folk mythology of British politics.

We see signs of similar developments around the world. In summer 2016, my research team did a 3-week workshop with the Salzburg Academy helping 80 students from 20 countries to map the civic imagination of their region and thus create a global atlas of the civic imagination. What stories motivate us towards social and political change? Folk tales? Religious narratives? Stories from history or contempo-



rary reality? Stories from popular culture? And what commonalities can we find across those different forms of the civic imagination?

Our book is supported by a robust digital archive that has many resources for educators and activists to use in mentoring their participants. You can find it at [byanymedia.org](http://byanymedia.org). Some of these materials are produced in partnership with the activist groups we study. We partnered with the crowdsourced arts project *Hit(Re)cord* to develop some conversation starter videos for classroom use, and in turn, we field-tested these videos in partnership with the *National Writing Project* and the *National Association of Media Literacy Educators*. We hope that these resources will be used to improve civic and media literacy education, helping students to hear the voices of their contemporaries— young, informed, civically engaged people sharing their perspectives on issues that matter to them.

And we are extending the book through a special issue of the *Journal of Digital and Media Literacy* (<http://www.jodml.org/>) focused on the pathway from voice to influence, which certainly has much to share about the question of civic agency.

**N. A. Henry Jenkins is a powerful brand, especially in the cultural studies and media education communities. It is also a transmedia brand with a multi-platform presence. How have you managed that brand to promote critical thinking?**

**H. J.** The term “brand” feels appropriate to me, because the name, *Henry Jenkins*, stands for more than a single individual. I am often asked how I do everything I do, and the simple answer is that I am not an isolated individual. I am part of a larger network. Everything I do is collaborative. Everything I do has a pedagogical dimension.

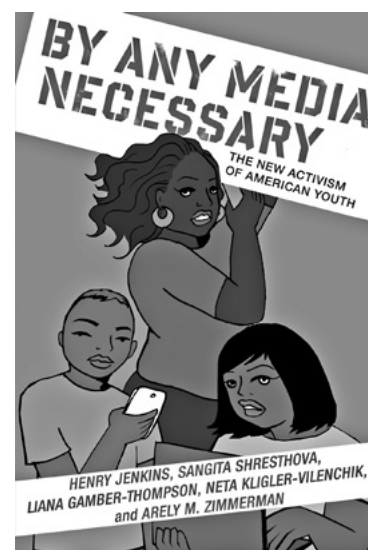
So, to continue with the example above, the materials and resources we’ve assembled around *By Any Media Necessary* reflect deep collaborations every step along the way. The ideas informing the book and the vocabulary we used came out of my involvement in a multidisciplinary research network on *Youth and Participatory Politics* and also from conversation with our sibling network on *Connected Learning*. The book is co-authored with a mix of post-docs and PhD students I assembled at USC’s *Annenberg School of*

*Communications and Journalism*. Each of the writers were working on their own case studies, but we were also meeting each week to talk through connections across the cases, and thus, the book reads as a coherent monograph even though it has multiple authors. The book’s cover was designed by an undocumented youth whose visual style has had a strong impact on the *DREAMer* movement.

Behind those authors was a larger research group, *Civic Paths*, which might at any moment in time involve 10-15 Ph D. candidates from multiple departments, who were our thinking partners on this project. They were also doing their own research, sometimes in various collaborations with each other and with various affiliated faculty. This was a space where we could talk through what we were reading and writing, share drafts, solicit research partners, and do short-term projects. And this group in turn partnered with the mix of organizations I mentioned above to extend the book into various other spaces—the online resources, yes, but also a range of webinars we’ve conducted with the Connected Learning Network (<http://connected-learning.tv/>).

And at the helm of all of this is my extraordinary research director, Sangita Shresthova, a former MIT student who has been working with me on this project since I moved to LA seven years ago. She manages the students, handles the logistics, becomes the key intellectual and creative collaborator on the project, and ensures that everything keeps moving forward amidst all of the other demands on my time and attention.

All of these partnerships involve mutual mentorship: the exchange of knowledge, insights, skills, and resources amongst groups of people who can have greater impact working together than we would have working as individuals. I struggle often with the ways in which my brand both enables more people to see this work but also may suck up too much of the credit from all of these other gifted people who are contributing to this project.



That said, I am very protective of that brand—what kinds of ideas get attached to it—and I do believe that the things that I support have a consistent message, each in their own ways helping us to push towards a more participatory culture. And there is a commitment across all of this to make the ideas accessible to a broad range of communities that are each in their own ways seeking to exert greater agency in terms of self-determination and self-representation.

As we think about how to connect scholarship with agency, I believe we have to move beyond critique. Critique is a tool for social change, but it should be a starting point—we need to identify problems with existing structures, for sure, but we also need advocacy, we need to be contributing to the civic imagination, we need to be spotlighting examples where people are making a difference in the world, we need to be open to new and emerging possibilities. If we are going to move beyond critique, we need to share what we are for and not simply what we are against. And I would say that this, as much as anything else, is what drives me and my many collaborators.

**N. A. I am particularly intrigued by the series of interviews on your personal blog. Specifically, why you selected the interview media form and how that form might intersect with notions of agency. Almost all the interviews—the content—involve the interviewees’ agency, but is the interview form—in and of itself—a kind of agency, or does it facilitate agency? What have you learned about questioning and the interview form? And what—if any—is the agency of your posting them to your personal rather than professional website?**

**H. J.** First of all, I intend my blog as an intervention in the flow of knowledge. We are in the midst of a moment of profound and prolonged media change, which impacts every aspect of our lives, and there is an urgent need, a professional obligation, for media scholars to move beyond their disciplinary enclaves and engage with other groups who are working through the same set of questions. So I chose the blog form because it is accessible to a diverse group of readers—academics and educators but also policy makers, journalists, industry people, fans, gamers, etc., each of

whom have their own reason to want to engage with our changing media landscape.

And I have found the blog entries flow easily across national borders, helped in part by volunteers who translate individual posts that matter to them into their own national languages, and in turn, I am able to feature work from many different countries, increasing its visibility beyond local borders.

Part of the intervention is to foster conversations, to introduce other scholars whose work should be more widely known and discussed, and also to model what thoughtful conversations across disciplines or nationalities might look like. When I started the blog, I wrote most of the pieces myself. Now, it is mostly interviews. I play a role in shaping the agenda of these conversations in terms of choosing which authors to contact and in terms of framing some questions emerging from their work. So, over time, readers certainly get a sense of what I am seeking as an interlocutor, but I also hope that they get exposed to a much broader range of voices and perspectives.

These conversations may take various forms. Most often, I am interviewing people about their work. But I’ve also hosted conversations (rather than interviews) with other authors—for example, a prolonged exchange with Tessa Jolls about the current state of media literacy education—and between other authors. We’ve done some rather large-scale exchanges involving many contributors around issues impacting the field of fandom studies.

And I’ve hosted projects, such as *Participatory Poland*, that are curated by others—in this case, a group of Polish educators I had encouraged to apply the concepts of participatory culture and learning in their own post-Socialist context. And I make the blog an extension of my own teaching, encouraging my students to share some of their ideas with the world through this platform.

More generally, I am interested in the conversation format as a way of breaking down boundaries between scholars and encouraging more flexibility in how we think through issues together. See, for example, a series of conversations about participation which I organized with Nick Couldry for the *International Journal of Communications* (<http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/2748/1119>) or the book-long conversation I had with danah boyd and

Mimi Ito that we published as *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era* (<http://ca.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0745660703.html>).

I believe that the current structures of academic discourse result in a fixity of thinking: we throw essays and books over a wall at each other with often years of delays between responses, and this is totally inadequate if our goal is to document a changing world or even moreso if our goal is to bring about social and cultural transformations.

**N. A. Some pundits suggest that social media weaken agency, either through clicktivism or by reducing people's face-to-face relationships. They suggest that the reduced personal connection people might feel during online communications has created superficial relationships. Others cite the *Arab Spring*, *Black Lives Matter* and the *Occupy Movement* as examples of social media's potential agency. How has the social media environment impacted agency?**

H. J. This is a key set of issues that we try to address in *By Any Media Necessary* (<http://www.amazon.com/Any-Media-Necessary-Activism-Connected/dp/1479899984>). Certainly it would be a shame if young people substituted clicking and passing along messages online for other forms of political participation, but that is not what we found through our research. Various social media platforms or video sharing sites are being actively deployed in the production and circulation of information and the mobilization of publics around specific issues. Youth use social media to direct collective attention towards issues that matter to them, though they make different choices about how “political” they want to be on different media platforms. They use these social media platforms to gain access to perspectives they might not encounter in their everyday lives, though research also suggests that they most regularly interact online with people they already know face-to-face. Some groups are making more tactical use of these platforms, and not necessarily just the “usual suspects.” We found, for example, that undocumented youth were among the most sophisticated in their use of social media, despite the fact that many of them lacked the kind of privately-owned technologies enjoyed by other American youth. Often, they were using tools made available to

them through public libraries or other public institutions. But they were using social media to move across physical boundaries in their everyday interactions and to direct attention towards things they care about.

We might think, for example, about how #blacklivesmatter emerged as people in different locations pooled knowledge and worked together to call attention to larger patterns of racialized police violence. What might at one time have been treated as a series of isolated incidents and read entirely in terms of the individuals involved is now understood in relation to systemic racism in large part because that hashtag helped diverse and scattered participants to link their perspectives and experiences together.

*We throw essays and books over a wall at each other with often years of delays between responses, and this is totally inadequate if our goal is to document a changing world or even moreso if our goal is to bring about social and cultural transformations.*

But #blacklivesmatter and these other movements do not stop there. For one thing, when people communicate their views online, this often has implications in their face-to-face communities. Because social media doesn't necessarily differentiate different audiences, their relations to others in their lives—their family, their teachers, their community, their bosses—are put at risk as views that might once have been expressed in private are brought more fully into view. So, social media critics are wrong when they describe this as the lowest risk form of activism.

Beyond that, these activist groups are also taking to the streets to dramatize their messages in various kinds of public demonstrations. They are translating their views into street art and posters that may allow them to be seen by people who would not directly encounter the protestors themselves. They are learning within these activist groups how to exert influence on political leaders (thus the various confrontations between #BLM protestors and the presidential candidates) and on the media itself (given how often these voices are now being heard on radio or television).

This is at the heart of what we mean when we talk about bringing about change through ‘any media necessary.’ We find very few youth who are engaging with

these issues through social media alone. For many, social media is considered as part of a large range of tactics and strategies through which they are seeking social change.

**N. A. Media literacy is often well-supported at the post-secondary level, but not well represented in K - 12 US education policy compared to the UK, some Australian states and Ontario. (Even in Ontario, where there is strong policy, there is weak implementation support.) In fact, *By Any Media Necessary* is an example of ad hoc media literacy education. Is weak official support at the elementary/high school school level a failure of agency? A misunderstanding of media literacy? Might schools' media literacy education suffer or prosper if it were supported by government policy?**

**H. J.** If you want to see evidence of agency, you need look no further than the many educators around the country who have chosen to incorporate media literacy activities and resources into their teaching in the absence of institutional support and sometimes in the face of institutional opposition. They have done so because of their own personal commitments to ensuring that their students have the capacities for critical thought and social action. They have done so, sometimes, by bonding together within a larger media literacy movement, forging networks with other teachers, seeking out insights through journals and websites and podcasts and blogs and webinars, mostly on their own time and at their own expense.

Let me be clear that when I talk about educators, I do not mean only classroom teachers, but also librarians, community organizers, religious leaders, and others who have brought discussions of media literacy into their domains. I find this commitment inspirational but also frustrating, because there's no question that many more resources and interventions are needed. Part of the point of bringing media literacy into our schools is to ensure equal access to experiences and knowledge which can help us to foster a more participatory culture.

That said, I worry about what happens to the creativity, vision, and passion that drives the media literacy movement right now if it becomes a bureaucratic mandate, mostly in the hands of people who lack that

passion and do not understand core principles, if it becomes one more thing people are expected to teach in an already over-crowded school day. For me, the only realistic way forward would be to see media literacy as part of a paradigm shift—not simply or not mostly new content we teach but a new way of thinking about and teaching all of the school content, not an added-on subject but a set of skills which teachers take ownership of across disciplines. This is part of what motivated my book, *Reading in a Participatory Culture* ([http://www.amazon.com/Reading-Participatory-Culture-Moby-Dick-Classroom/dp/0807754013/ref=sr\\_1\\_1](http://www.amazon.com/Reading-Participatory-Culture-Moby-Dick-Classroom/dp/0807754013/ref=sr_1_1)): we modeled how we might teach classic literature—in this case, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*—differently in a world which takes new media literacies seriously as a central part of our pedagogical mission.

**N. A. Marshall McLuhan's main ideas date from the 50s to the 70s. Even his most recent thinking is now almost 40 years old. What aspects of agency do you think he helped us understand? What aspects have we developed post-McLuhan?**

**H. J.** I am far from an expert on McLuhan so I need to paint in somewhat broad strokes here. As a media scholar, I have enormous respect for McLuhan's contributions to our field. In many ways, he led the way from a focus on individual media towards an approach that looked comparatively across media. He also led the way in moving us from thinking about media in hierarchical terms (e.g., literature is better than film which is better than television which is better than comics...) and towards a more ecological approach that describes the media system in place within a particular society (here, he follows in the footsteps of Harold Innis). Above all, he makes the basic claim that media matter—not simply on the level of their content but in terms of their affordances, in terms of our changed perceptions of time and space. All of these insights remain fundamental to our field. And let's not forget how influential all of these insights were in helping to inspire the media literacy movement in North America.

Where I struggle with McLuhan is that the impact of media in his account can sometimes seem predetermined. Coming out of cultural studies, I see culture as a site of struggle, as we grapple with what uses we are going to make of the media that enters our world,

what role we want it to play in our lives. Sometimes, McLuhan tells us that media are put out before they are thought out, which still suggests a place for critical discussions to re-interpret and alter their impact on the world. But there is a degree of technological determinism in McLuhan's work that makes me uncomfortable because it over-rides the notion of agency that we have been trying to develop across this interview.

That said, McLuhan thought about teaching in terms of probes—throwing out ideas, even extreme or excessive ideas, as provocations that force the reader/student to question and think through what is being said. He often makes amplified claims about the impact of media to break his listeners out of their lethargic acceptance of the world they have been given and to force them to critically engage with other possibilities. I really value this model for how a teacher might engage with all kinds of publics—sparking discussions on issues that might otherwise seem too settled. But it also means we should be cautious about reading his comments literally or taking his insights as a kind of scripture. This was not the way he positioned himself in any given conversation—he often played the part of an oracle who needed to be interpreted, a fool or clown who disrupted established patterns, but not as a savior whose words were to be printed in red ink. Let's think of McLuhan as a provocateur rather than a prophet.

**N. A. If you were interviewing Henry Jenkins about agency, what question would you ask him?**

**H. J.** You've done a better job here than I would have done.

But let me say a bit more at the end about where my commitment to the concept of agency comes from. I recently wrote an essay for Renee Hobbs' book about the intellectual 'grandparents' of the current media literacies movement, and I chose to write my essay about my mentor, John Fiske, and through him, his mentor, Raymond Williams [an excerpt can be found at <http://henryjenkins.org/2016/06/tracing-the-roots-of-media-literacy-raymond-williams-and-john-fiske.html>]. For me, Williams' essay "Culture is Ordinary" (<http://artsites.ucsc.edu/faculty/Gustafson/FILM%20162.W10/readings/Williams.Ordinary.pdf>) represents a manifesto for the kinds of work I want to pursue. First, there is Williams' steadfast commitment to chal-

lenge old cultural hierarchies, to take seriously forms of cultural production and cultural knowledge that are dismissed by others. John Fiske taught me that as human beings, we do not engage in meaningless activities: the task of the scholar, and by extension the teacher, in response to an unfamiliar form of culture is to take every step we can to make sure we understand what it means to the people who are embracing and participating in it. We should use our discomfort as a

*It is easy to do the opposite: to dismiss the culture our students prize in favor of trying to impose our own tastes upon them and, in the process, to weaken their critical abilities by teaching them to distrust their own perceptions of the world around them.*

prompt to ask more questions rather than make pronouncements. And that means our work starts with an ethic that respects and values the agency of others.

Second, Williams himself tests theoretical insights against lived experiences. He writes in a key passage, "When the Marxists say that we live in a dying culture and that the masses are ignorant, I have to ask them, as I did ask them [as a student], where on Earth they have lived. A dying culture, and ignorant masses, are not what I have known and seen." Williams was a Marxist, and so he is testing theories that he values deeply here and using his own direct experience of the world as a yardstick to determine whether they make sense or not.

This core skepticism—never cynicism—is what we want to teach our students: we want them to struggle with, and negotiate around, the representations of their lives which the media provides them, even as we need to respect and value their own judgements about what forms of cultural practice are meaningful to them. It is easy to do the opposite: to dismiss the culture our students prize in favor of trying to impose our own tastes upon them and, in the process, to weaken their critical abilities by teaching them to distrust their own perceptions of the world around them. ❖

# Media Theory 101: AGENCY

By David Buckingham



**David Buckingham** is an Emeritus Professor of Media and Communications at Loughborough University, UK. He has received the Jessie McCanse Award, published 30 books and 250 articles about media, young people and education, and lectured in more than 35 countries around the world. You can find out more about his past and current projects at [www.davidbuckingham.net](http://www.davidbuckingham.net).

---

[power] [structuration] [social theory] [structuralist theory] [Anthony Giddens] [active audience]

## Defining agency

When the word ‘agency’ is used in relation to media, it generally relates to organizations that *produce* particular kinds of media, like advertising agencies or news agencies. Alternatively, we use the term ‘agents’ to refer to intermediaries between creative producers and media organizations—as in the case of literary agents, who represent authors in dealing with publishers.

However, in media theory, the word has a much broader and more abstract meaning. One online dictionary defines it as ‘an action or intervention producing a particular effect’. Agency involves factors such as individual choice, auton-



omy, self-determination and creativity. It implies *activity*, but it also implies power—the *power* to produce an effect, to have influence, to make a difference. There are plenty of forms of activity in the world,

but not all of them involve power of this kind.

Academic discussions of agency tend to couple it with *structure*. Structures are the wider social factors that shape and constrain—and to some extent determine—the actions of individuals. Key examples of structural forces would include the economy, the political system, and aspects such as class, age, gen-

der and ethnicity. In different ways, all these structural forces can be seen to define the parameters of individual freedom and power.

In social theory, structure and agency are often opposed to each other: more structure means less agency, and vice versa. Historically, one could argue that the relationship between structure and agency has been one of the central debates—if not the central debate—in the social and human sciences. As we shall see, it is also a key dimension of studying media.

The question of structure and agency is essentially a question about power. To what extent are individuals able to choose and determine who they are, and who they will become? How far do factors such as economic status or social class determine or constrain our everyday experiences and our life chances? Are our personal identities shaped by broader forces such as gender or ethnicity, and to what extent are we able to challenge or escape from these? As I will argue, this debate is often presented in terms of an either/or choice. However, there may be ways of looking beyond what is often a very simple polar opposition.

## Structure, agency and media power

Broadly speaking, *structuralist* theories tend to emphasize the power of these broader factors. Such theories are often accused of being unduly deterministic, in the sense that they may ignore the diversity of individual experience and the degree of free choice and control that individuals have. On the other hand, theories that emphasize agency tend to be accused of overstating—

and indeed celebrating—the power of individuals. They are often seen as unduly individualistic.

Many of the key debates in social theory can be understood in these terms. Back in the 1970s, one of the major debates in academic Media and Cultural



Studies was to do with the relationship between *base and superstructure* in Marxist theory. Some argued that human actions were ultimately determined by the economic base—that is, the relationships between labour and capital. Others argued that there were aspects of the ‘super-

structures’—not least areas like the media industries and education—which could be seen as more or less autonomous or independent from economic forces.

This had important implications for understanding *ideology*. Did capitalist control of the media industries mean that the media necessarily promoted capitalist ideologies? Were the ruling ideas in society simply the ideas of the ruling class, as Marx put it, or were the workings of ideology more diverse and unpredictable? Those who emphasized the economic base were often accused of ‘vulgar’ (that is, unduly crude) Marxism; while those who emphasized the autonomy of the superstructures were accused of ignoring fundamental economic realities.

In relation to media, a version of this binary opposition is regularly played out in both academic and public debate. Here again, the key question is: *where does the power lie?* Do media institutions have the power to impose their definitions of the world on audiences? Or to what extent are audiences free to make choices, and to create their own meanings? Here again, we tend to be presented with either/or choices. Either people are passive consumers, or they are active participants; either they are manipulated by media, or they have the ability to control them; either the media are powerful, or audiences are.

So, for example, we could look at the role of media in forming gender identity in these terms. Approaches that emphasize *structure* tend to focus on media institutions and media texts. For example, studies are likely to show that women still occupy relatively few senior

roles in many media industries; and they identify systematic patterns of under-representation or mis-representation, for example in the number and the kinds of roles women take in mainstream movies or on TV. These things may be changing, but advocates of the structuralist argument often claim that such changes are largely superficial or trivial.

By contrast, an emphasis on *agency* would tend to focus on media audiences. Here we find studies that show how audience members (and especially female audiences) make meanings that are not necessarily the same as those that are intended by media producers. People may resist the meanings that are apparently promoted by media, and use media in playful or subversive ways to serve their own needs and purposes.

So, for example, a structuralist analysis of children’s toys would look at the market forces that result in a gender-defined, ‘pink and blue’ world. It would argue that children’s toys are dominated by gender stereotypes and limited role models. However, looking at children’s agency would suggest that these factors are far from being all-powerful: when we look at children’s play, we find that children use these toys in much more diverse and creative ways, which do not necessarily conform to gender stereotypes.

### The power of media audiences

The history of research on media audiences can be seen as a constantly swinging pendulum between ‘powerful media’ (structure) and ‘powerful audiences’ (agen-

*The history of research on media audiences can be seen as a constantly swinging pendulum between ‘powerful media’ (structure) and ‘powerful audiences’ (agency).*

cy). On the one hand, we have media effects research (which is very much about powerful media) and on the other, we have academic approaches like ‘uses and gratifications’ or ‘active audience theory’, which emphasize the power of audiences. Aside from occasional bouts of mud-slinging, these approaches tend to ignore each other, and they often look at quite different aspects of media, or different kinds of audience behaviour.

Back in the 1980s and 1990s, there were recur-

ring battles within Media Studies between audience researchers and those who studied the political economy of media institutions. Audience researchers were often accused of celebrating the power of ‘active audiences,’ and of a kind of shallow populism; while the political economists were condemned for overstating the power of media institutions, and subscribing to a kind of gloomy pessimism. For the most part, these accusations were quite wrong (although there were some exceptions!), but they contributed to a damaging polarization in the field.

*Those who celebrate the use of digital technologies by activists and social movements tend to ignore the ways in which they are used as a means of surveillance both by governments and by private companies.*

These debates also evolve as the media themselves evolve. In the past twenty years, the advent of digital and social media has seen a resurgence of claims about ‘powerful audiences’—and indeed, many have argued that media users are no longer merely ‘audiences,’ but rather active *participants*. Some argue that media culture is now a ‘participatory culture,’ in which ordinary people have an almost infinite ability to create and distribute their own meanings. Such approaches clearly stress the power of individual agency.

However, this euphoria about new media tends to ignore the massive political and economic interests at stake. Most major social media platforms are commercially owned, and data on individual users is sold in the commercial market. The companies that own these platforms control their design and terms of service, and users have very little choice but to consent to this. Meanwhile, those who celebrate the use of digital technologies by activists and social movements tend to ignore the ways in which they are used as a means of surveillance both by governments and by private companies.

Here again, the key question is about *power*. It is assumed that greater activity on the part of ‘the-people formerly-known-as-the-audience’ will result in them having greater power to determine how the world is represented, and to exercise influence. Yet *activity* is not the same as *agency*.

## Beyond structure and agency

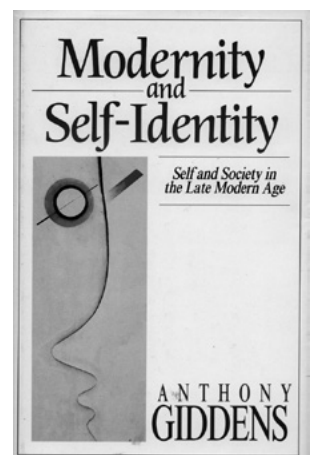
Is there any way of looking beyond what often seems to be a very polarized debate? One of the problems here is that media power is often seen as a kind of ‘zero sum’ equation. If media power goes up, audience (or user) power goes down. If audiences claim or assume more power, the power of media producers is correspondingly undermined or reduced. And there is an assumption that there must be a way of balancing these things out—some kind of happy medium.

Some recent work in social theory suggests an alternative approach. Here structure and agency are seen, not as opposed, but as complementary—as two sides of the same coin. And in some cases, researchers have argued that the distinction itself is no longer very helpful.

Structuration theory—mainly associated with Anthony Giddens—implies that structure and agency are both parts of the same process. Structure works through agency, and agency works through structure. Both constantly develop and evolve in relation to each other. So, for example, if we think about gender identity, we could argue that ‘gender’ does not exist independently of the actions of individuals; but equally, individual behaviour only makes sense if it is seen (at least partly) in relation to dominant ideas about gender.

Another popular way of looking at this is by using ideas about *performance*, particularly associated with Judith Butler. The claim here is that individuals actively perform gender: while some of what they do appears to confirm expectations, they might also ignore or subvert them. Gender is not an objective or fixed structure, external to individuals, but something that has to be constantly produced and reproduced through individual actions. However, what it means to be ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ (for example) is defined through a history of actions and interactions: it is not simply a matter of free choice.

So if we think about our example of children’s toys, we would have to accept that most toys (and the





ways in which they are marketed) draw on conventional signifiers of gender. But they also become ‘gendered’ as a result of how they are used—how children play with them, as well as how adults choose them and talk about them. These processes may involve a good deal of diversity and negotiation: conventional expectations are by no means guaranteed. From this perspective, children’s play with toys is not simply a matter of them being passively slotted into pre-determined ‘roles’. Rather, it is a more complex and unpredictable process, in which objects (such as toys and media) as well as people (children and parents) can play many different parts. Similar arguments could be made about the role of gender in adult play, most obviously in the case of computer games.



More recently, approaches like *actor network theory* and *practice theory* seem to take this a step further. It would be foolhardy to attempt to explain these ideas here, but essentially they both challenge the basic distinction between structure and agency. They suggest that there is no such thing as a ‘social structure’ out there, which can be considered separately from the practices of human individuals (or ‘subjects’). But equally, subjects only come into existence in and through specific social practices: we are what we do.

Rather than focusing research on specific individuals or groups, or on more abstract aspects of the social structure, these approaches suggest that we need to focus on specific *practices* (such as media use), or particular *networks of actors* (which would include non-human actors like media texts). We need to understand how these practices or networks constitute both the individual and the social—how they bring the individual subject into being, and how they create what we perceive to be ‘the social’.

One of the best ways of doing this is to follow a particular object through the various networks of actors in which it is embedded. For example, an ac-

*Subjects only come into existence in and through specific social practices: we are what we do.*

tor-network approach to children’s toys might well take a single example, such as *Barbie*, and trace how it comes to have meaning, and how those meanings change, across different contexts and relationships. In this case, it would involve considering aspects of design and marketing alongside consumption and use. It would look at how different versions of the doll are marketed, and how this has changed over time. It would examine how the object itself (the doll) is used, and how its meanings are defined and challenged, both overtly (for example by feminist campaigners) but also more covertly or subversively by fans and within children’s play. This kind of analysis—which would be perfectly accessible for school students—is likely to take us well beyond simplistic ideas about the effects of ‘bad role models’.

To return to my key question, these approaches all imply a rather different view of *power*. They regard power not as a possession—something that is owned by one or other party—but as a process and a relationship. This also applies to media power. The media industries do not simply impose meanings on passive audiences; but nor do users simply create their own meanings, in a wholly free and autonomous way. Rather than seeing the relationship between structure and agency as a matter of ‘either/or’, we need to see it as ‘both/and’. ✱

# Agentive Realism and Media Literacy

By Michael Dezuanni Ph.D.



A/Prof **Michael Dezuanni**, Queensland University of Technology undertakes research and teaching in the field of digital cultures and education, which includes film and media education, digital literacies and arts education. He is appointed by the Film, Television and Animation Discipline in the Creative Industries Faculty and is a Chief Investigator within QUT's Digital Media Research Centre. Michael explores the most effective, productive and meaningful ways for individuals to use and understand the media and technologies in their lives.

---

[media effects] [active audience] [maker] [performativity] [agentive realism]

**W**hat does it mean for young people to act in or upon the world, *with, through* and *in response* to media; that is, with *agency*?

This question has driven media literacy in all its forms since at least the 1920s, when concerned adults first began to question the relationship between children and the first mass medium to so publically appeal to children—the cinema. In the 80 plus years since the Payne Fund Studies set out to understand the effects of cinema on children, the question of young people's agency with media has persisted as a social concern. Television, comic books, video games, the home rental market for 'video nasty' horror films in the 1980s, heavy metal rock music, the *Dungeons and Dragons* board game, the internet, social media and online gaming have all raised concern—if not moral panic—about young people's ability to act in and upon the world consciously, morally, ethically, safely and responsibly.

Media literacy education is arguably a product of social concern about young people's potential vulnerability to, or ability to exploit, various forms of popular culture and media. Different media literacy schools of thought have located agency variously, leading to a range of policy and educational responses: the 'protectionism' or 'inoculation' associated with F.R. Leavis (1933); the 'demystification' of the Frankfurt School Marxists in the 1940s and '50s and 1980s scholars like Len Masterman (1990); the 'discrimination' approach

in the early work of scholars like Stuart Hall (1967) and Raymond Williams (Williams, 1966); the 'active audience' approach within Cultural Studies and the thinking of scholars such as Sonia Livingstone (2008), David Buckingham (2003) and Henry Jenkins (1992). These approaches have made sometimes similar and sometimes very different assumptions about young people's ability to act in or upon the world with media.

Digital media technologies have added further complexity to the question of agency in terms of young people's potential vulnerability to—or ability to exploit—media. Digital media literacy recognizes the collapse of media-making and consumption practices. Social media participation, for instance, often includes the production and circulation of images of the self and others, raising new questions about ethics, safety and responsibility. While many well-established media literacy concepts can be applied to digital media, new concepts are also required to account for how the relationship between individuals and media has changed due to digital technologies. In social media and digital games contexts, in particular, it becomes increasingly difficult to unravel processes of analysis and creation; although of course, even before digital media the separating out of media-analysis and media-making did not well represent many young people's engagement with popular culture, as Jenkins so clearly demonstrated (1992). The entanglement of media-making and thinking/meaning-making challenges us to find new

ways to think about agency and it is helpful to turn to theories of knowledge to identify ways forward.

At the heart of the issue of agency is the question of how we theorize the individual's ability to act in and upon the world. To understand agency, we cannot avoid philosophical questions about the production of knowledge and self-awareness. René Descartes' famous dictum 'I think, therefore I am' has arguably had a more profound influence on how we understand agency within the Western philosophical tradition than any other theory. The distinction between the immaterial mind and the material, sensory (and allegedly unreliable) body deeply informs our understanding of knowledge. In separating mind from body, Cartesian dualism places more emphasis on what one thinks than what one feels, senses or does in the material world. From this perspective, the ability to think is essential to agency because without self-awareness, it is impossible to act upon the world. The material experience of the world, e.g., the body's functions and capabilities and non-human entities like technologies are less essential because they become secondary to the ability to think. It is not hard to identify the influence of Cartesian dualism on the education systems established through public policy initiatives in the 19th and 20th centuries. Furthermore, it is easy to see the Cartesian tradition within media literacy education, which has often placed emphasis on young people learning *about* the media, with emphasis on critical thinking. From this perspective—which I believe is flawed—unless one learns to reflect on media production and consumption, agency is likely absent.

There is something troubling about over-emphasizing critical thinking when applied to media literacy, particularly media participation and production. As a media educator teaching high school students, I was never convinced a student who could recite a media theory or write a critical reflection about their own media productions possessed any more agency than a student who mastered media technologies to create compelling work. However, we in the media literacy field tend not to trust student media production as evidence of agency. We worry media production may simply copy, quote or replicate commercial products or that the development of media production skills is not as important as the development of conceptual understanding. We tend to privilege explanation, ar-



ticulation and self-awareness when we assess students. We only need to look at media curriculum documents and assessment requirements in countries like Australia and the United Kingdom for evidence of this.

But there is another way to think about how individuals 'become' within the world through media production, where media production involves acting *within* and *upon* the world, without necessarily in-

*I was never convinced a student who could recite a media theory or write a critical reflection about their own media productions possessed any more agency than a student who mastered media technologies to create compelling work.*

volving critical reflection. As a researcher, I have increasingly turned to theorists such as Michel Foucault (1989), Judith Butler (1990) and Karen Barad (2007) who argue Cartesian dualism inadequately accounts for the individual. Barad, for instance, draws on both Foucault's theories of discursivity and Butler's theory of performativity to argue the basic problem of dualism centers on what she calls the mistake of 'representationalism.'

Representationalism assumes knowledge can and should be represented through language, symbol, structure and categorization. To create knowledge, we represent it, for instance through scientific theories and methods to seek and represent 'facts' and truths. Likewise, in media studies we might aim to have stu-

dents recreate media knowledge through writing, analysis or through explicitly recreating genre knowledge by making their own media (generally accompanied by written explanation). The problem with representationalism is that it assumes we can control knowledge and stand apart from it, and that this equates to agency. But as Foucault so convincingly argues, it is im-

*Agency exists as much in material interaction as it does in the deployment of concepts and theories.*

possible to disentangle oneself from discourse. When we produce the self through language and practice, we simply repeat social and cultural norms and it is only through the creative application of norms that we might produce power. From this perspective, 'critical thinking' is as prone to repetition of harmful social norms as creative practice is.

Butler extends Foucault's work to argue we *performatively* repeat **and vary** norms in agential ways. Performativity involves material and discursive be-



coming in the world, requiring both the body and the mind, and it is in circumstances where individuals are willing to risk social viability that variation to harmful norms is likely to take place. Barad's conception of 'agential realism' argues that material and discursive (language-based) aspects are entangled in processes of performative becoming. Her point is that we must acknowledge both the discursive and material to see how individuals 'become' in the world.

None of this is merely theoretical. When students create a video they are 'becoming' in material and discursive ways and are therefore acting in the world. It is as important to have a successful bodily arrangement with a device for capturing footage (to incorporate the camera apparatus) as it is to be able to arrange shots according to genre conventions and to be able to think and speak about this. Each element potentially involves agency. From this perspective, when students make a video, they mediate bodily knowledge, representational concepts, technological/apparatus interaction and more. 'Knowledge' is assembled through this complex entanglement and agency is produced through these arrangements.

So what are the implications of this understanding of agency for media literacy educators? Perhaps most importantly, it means agency exists as much in material interaction as it does in the deployment of concepts and theories. It is as likely students will act upon the world via the development of a new technological skill as it is they will act upon the world via the arrangement of thoughts and concepts. This bolsters what I think many media literacy educators have often 'felt'—that creative media production allows students to become in the world in important ways and that it is not necessary for students to be able to articulate their achievements in words for these achievements to matter.

As someone who hopes media literacy can challenge potentially harmful social and cultural norms, I am also very much drawn to Butler's argument that it is through risking social viability that we undertake performative variation. That is, it is when we feel safe enough to 'become' in different ways that we are likely to vary norms. Media literacy classrooms should be safe environments for performative variation and media literacy matters most when young people are able to *speak about, with* and *through* media concepts and technologies in ways that vary normativity. This might be as simple as writing a section of code in a new way whilst making a digital game; as straightforward as feeling comfortable with holding a camera to shoot footage, or as complex as making a film to enter a dialogue about an issue.

Creating safe classroom spaces to promote a range of perspectives, viewpoints and practices seems particularly important in relation to young people's

social media participation. The vernacular creativities (Burgess, 2006) of taking and circulating photos, the quotidian and curatorial practices of reposting images, videos and text and the shared practices of online gaming all add complexity to young people's social-material participation in media ecologies. The practices of bringing oneself into being through social media activity potentially heighten the risks of normative repetition or the consequences of varying norms and it is important that media literacy educators pro-



*What we should avoid in media classrooms is promoting the belief there is only one right way to answer a question or to participate through formal and informal production.*

vide students with opportunities to practice 'doing' social media in new and different ways.

What we should avoid in media classrooms is promoting the belief there is only one right way to answer a question or to participate through formal and informal production. This may be difficult to achieve when we are required to adhere to standardization through testing, comparison and making judgements about quality. Unless we can provide safe conditions for variation, though, we are unlikely to create the best conditions for student agency in the media literacy

classroom. ❖

#### REFERENCES

- Barad, K. M. (2007). "Meeting the universe halfway: quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning" pp. xiii, 524 p). Available from <http://ezproxy.library.uq.edu.au/login?url=http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/9780822388128> via eDuke at Highwire
- Buckingham, D. (2003). *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Burgess, J. (2006). "Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling." *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 2(20), pp. 201-214.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1989). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, S., & Whannel, P. (1967). *The popular arts*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual Poachers, Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Leavis, F. R., & Thompson, D. (1933). *Culture and Environment*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. *New media & society*, 10(3), 393-411.
- Masterman, L. (1990). *Teaching the media*. London ; New York: Routledge.
- Williams, R. (1966). *Communications* (Rev. ed.). London: Chatto & Windus.

# Media Literacy, Good Agency: If Jez We Could?<sup>1</sup>

By Julian McDougall



**Julian McDougall** is Professor in Media Education and Head of the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice at Bournemouth University, UK. He is editor of the Media Education Research Journal and the Journal of Media Practice and the author / editor of a range of books, chapters and articles in the fields of media education and media literacy. He runs a professional doctorate programme for teachers of creative arts and media.

---

[civic agency] [neoliberalism] [UK politics] [GAPMIL] [ethnography] [Brexit] [Zizek] [hegemony]

*There is nothing about neoliberalism that is deserving of our respect, and so in concert with a prefigurative politics of creation, my message is quite simply ‘fuck it’. Fuck the hold that it has on our political imaginations. Fuck the violence it engenders. Fuck the inequality it extols as a virtue. Fuck the way it has ravaged the environment. Fuck the endless cycle of accumulation and the cult of growth..... Fuck the ever-intensifying move towards metrics and the failure to appreciate that not everything that counts can be counted. Fuck the desire for profit over the needs of community. Fuck absolutely everything neoliberalism stands for, and fuck the Trojan horse that it rode in on!* (Springer, 2016: 288)

**M**edia literacy and progressive politics are not the same thing. I do not believe that media education should necessarily see itself as political, despite my own politics being pretty clear—I am a member of Momentum, the grassroots wing of the Labour party in the UK, a ‘Corbynista.’ But the recent field of educational work on media literacy for civic engagement does rather force this issue, so in this piece I want to explore what media literacy for ‘good civic agency,’ by which I mean a progressive, liberal, egalitarian, profoundly anti-neoliberal, so essentially LEFT

WING project, would look like. To be clear, I am not suggesting that media education could or should do this, but equally I don’t accept the idea that media literacy and civic engagement are *necessarily* connected, but I’m going to think through here an agentive media literacy designed to *absolutely fuck neoliberalism*.

## Terms (and conditions)

- Media literacy—let’s go with the broad brush headlines from the new UNESCO declaration, that media (and information) literacy is concerned with *what citizens choose to do with or how they respond to information, media and technology in their desire to participate, self-actualize, exchange culture and be ethical*. (UNESCO, 2015)
- Agency—knowledge in action (from the editors of JML in framing this issue)
- Civic agency—making media literate choices when engaging with media or using media to join the conversation in the public sphere or the commons.
- The relationship between media literacy and ‘good’ civic agency—thus far, hard to say.

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2015, Jeremy Corbyn, a veteran backbench Labour Party ‘rebel’, was persuaded to stand for leadership and won easily. This was, in part, the outcome of a successful social media campaign by the grassroots activist group Momentum, who coined the slogan ‘Jez We Can’ to echo Obama. <http://bzfd.it/2erQB0j>

- The relationship between media literacy, good agency and neoliberalism—must be oppositional.

## Media Literacy and Civic Action

Young people receiving media literacy education will, readers of JML will hope, be critical, creative, aware of more or less hegemonic corporate practices at work behind their social media activities, come to be reflexive about the mediated curation of their lives in third spaces, use media to change the world for the better, contribute to the global economy with their twenty-first century literacies and participate in a new digital public sphere. And their advanced new media literacy will keep them safe online. This, to say the least, far-reaching ambition is evident in the recent UNESCO declaration on Media and Information Literacy which, among many other objectives, calls upon those charged with enabling it to ‘enhance intercultural and interreligious dialogue, gender equality and a culture of peace and respect in the participative and democratic public sphere’ (UNESCO, 2015). And yet there is no pedagogic rationale for how this might all come about. If we had one, what would it look like?

In an interview for the *Media Education Research Journal* (<http://merj.info/>) about his important book on media literacy and the ‘emerging citizen’, (*Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen: Youth, Engagement and Participation in Digital Culture*, Peter Lang Pub Incorporated, 2014) Paul Mihailidis states this case:

*Citizens (now) have more voice, and more agency. They are not bound by borders for information or networks to disseminate news at a certain time and place. Digital culture has subverted how citizens debate, engage, and participate. However, how we teach and learn about citizenship is still grounded in civic structures and duties, and not in networks, connectivity, agency and participation. My book sets out, in essence, to show this disconnect and then argue for media literacy as the mandate for civic inclusion and democratic thought in digital culture. It’s clear that we have the capacity and networks in place, we just don’t have the learning and engagement contexts to match. (Herrero-Diz, 2015)*

Attending the Salzburg Academy on *Media Literacy and Global Change*, led by Paul, it struck me that a pretty consistent political agenda is at work, and appears to be signed up to, hearts and minds, by the facilitators and young people participating. For example, the 2016 event *challenged its participants to examine critically how the media shape public attitudes toward migration and how such a polarizing issue could be framed to support more civic-minded responses* (see MOVE, 2016). Civic-minded, in this sense, surely means something political, fostering resistance to ‘othering’ centre-right media discourse? The Salzburg forum seems like a kind of ‘third space’ (Gutierrez, 2008; Potter and McDougall, 2017) where people are saturated by rich civic media literacy activities, enabling funds of knowledge to translate into progressive and political action, but it isn’t a neutral space, the dynamics are charged with an unstated left-wing agency, a counter-script to neoliberalism (disclaimer—these are my words, not out of Salzburg). This is very hard to do in the second space (formal education) because in the classroom the external drivers for media literacy are framed by either deficit models (protectionist critical reading of ‘big media’) or neoliberal economic modalities (digital literacy skills for employment).

## Notes from a Small Island

As part of a comparative media literacy project with the *United Kingdom Literacy Association* (McDougall et al., 2015), we asked a group of Media students in

*And yet there is no pedagogic rationale for how this might all come about. If we had one, what would it look like?*

a sixth form college (pre-University, 16-19 years old) to undertake a creative task that 1) involved making something with an explicit agenda of civic participation, 2) putting it online and 3) attempting to engage an audience. Topics included the death penalty, the global water crisis, the cost of public transport for youth, feminism, teen female body image (twice), or the need for politics to be taught in schools and football (twice). One participant already had her own *Tumblr* but opted to set up a *Blogspot* in order to share

her short written post on the death penalty. Her feedback amounted to responses from three friends via *Whatsapp*. The one student to make a video claimed that she did not have the facility to upload it to the web: “I have no hosting sites to add my video onto as I do not have internet access on my laptop at home, I have took a video from my phone of the video I made on

campaigner in the UK, gets closer to the complexity of the socio-cultural framing of public sphere practices for young people—“*It’s a cultural shift, you’re trying to say to people, you’re a citizen before you’re a consumer.*”

Hoping to impact on this, our *Spirit of 13* project invited under 25s to make short films responding to Ken Loach’s documentary about the welfare state (<http://www.thespiritof45.com/>), to ‘give voice’ to their generation’s views on contemporary issues of social justice (see McDougall and Readman, 2015).

Eighteen months on, we re-connected with the participants to find out if they voted in the 2015 general election and to look for evidence of any broader ‘democratic engagement’ around the election fostered by their involvement. The participants revealed a degree of engagement in political/civic issues that they were able to relate to the *Spirit of 13* project, although they didn’t necessarily formalise this engagement in conventional terms. Only half the respondents voted but there was evidence of enthusiastic engagement with political issues via social media: “*Most of what fills my news feed is recommended articles and videos about political issues that my friends have ‘liked,’*” said one respondent. Another said, “*Social media helps me to understand what my peers think about a certain political issue. It’s also the fastest way to get hold of news (Twitter).*”

The reverse was true of traditional media, with most respondents suggesting that the press, TV and radio played a minor role, if any, in their media diets, which suggests that, for this generation, there is, at least, a correspondence between new technologies and political engagement.

Regarding the project itself, we elicited some clear statements about the relationship between filmmaking practice and political awareness: “*Gave me the framework to express already existing political ideas and provided the opportunity for a short discussion with younger students I wouldn’t have otherwise met to discuss social issues;*” “*Spirit of 13 opened my eyes to how much of everyday life is politics and how some of it is controlled;*” “*Making films is going from thought and theory to action in a way that resembles field research.*”

So *Spirit of 13* provided a stimulus for young people to explore stories and issues to promote reflection on the meanings of politics and social engagement but the conversion of such reflexive media literacy to di-

*In the classroom the external drivers for media literacy are framed by either deficit models (protectionist critical reading of ‘big media’) or neoliberal economic modalities (digital literacy skills for employment).*

*movie maker on my laptop so I could attach it here for you.*” Her video about the water crisis comprised stills, captions and music and was reminiscent of charity appeals. A ‘Politics in school’ piece began and ended with a piece to camera about the creator’s own experience, framing a series of vox pops with fellow students which served to demonstrate their own ignorance of politics. At the time of writing, the video had impressive playback but no responses. Another video largely comprises shots of fashion and makeup in shops with voiceovers from different girls about their response to the body image expected of women. This participant did show that she had shared the link on her *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Tumblr* accounts, though; again, there was no evidence of any audience engagement. Overall, none of the participants made any attempt to engage an audience online beyond a small circle of friends either due to reluctance or inability.

This finding is in keeping with the recent longitudinal, ethnographic observations from *The Class* (Livingstone and Sefton-Green, 2016). Whilst the young people here are strongly networked and there are some overlaps between college and lifeworld connections, there remains a great deal of insulation between personal and educational networking and a significant absence of civic engagement with any ‘new public spaces’.

### **Brexit Stage Right**

How ‘youth voice’ is articulated in specific practices, and on whose terms, is complex, especially in the ‘micropolitical’ social media age. On the ‘civic imperative,’ Jamal Edwards, ‘Youtube mogul’ and *Bite the Ballot*



rect civic action—at the polling station—appears to have been slipped away.

Another year on, these are hard times indeed for ‘good civics’. The generation that media literacy educators want to reach is growing up with a proliferation of terrorist attacks on EU nations, the refugee crisis (and the confused European response to it) and commonplace xenophobia towards Islam, hostility to migrants, the increase in hate discourse across social media, the UK’s departure from the European Union and the horrible alliance of ‘year zero’ presidential candidate Trump and Brexit architect Nigel Farage.

*UKIP and your disgrace,  
Chopped heads on London streets,  
all you Zombies tweet tweet tweet*  
(Sleaford Mods, 2014).

The UNESCO *Global Alliance for Media and Information Literacy* recently convened in Latvia and responses from delegates, EU and European Commission representatives and the UNESCO rapporteur to these developments centred on the (laudable) view that MIL could be used as a safeguard against hate discourse. But it’s hard to see how UNESCO statements about the importance of addressing hate speech translate meaningfully for those members of society who are ‘information resistant’ (UNESCO’s term) and/or reluctant to engage in public debate—those in the margins but happily so. The proposition from some panelists that MIL could have prevented Brexit was, to a UK delegate, hard to swallow when we know that younger people, immersed in social media and largely oblivious to the ‘old school’ press rhetoric of fear and loathing (of the other) largely either voted to remain or were excluded from the referendum by age. Arguably, MIL and some broader geo-civic education for the over 50s is what we need!

So—the inconvenient truth is that being media literate has no necessary relation to ‘good agency’. We urgently need to challenge two problematic assumptions—(1) that media literacy has any necessary relationship with civic engagement or participation in the public sphere and then (2) that if engagement / participation do arise partly as an outcome of media literacy, that there will necessarily be a liberal, egalitarian, environmental or peace-promoting politics



manifested in such agency. Media literate people are often pretty right wing, can be extreme, at worst badly ‘radical’ or at best speak a neoliberal discourse.

How has the media literacy community allowed itself this complacency? An obvious example is the optimism around digital social networks set against the more complex interplay between the network as a counter-commodifying space of resistance (the Digital Commons, for example) and the hegemonic control of networks in the neoliberal market. Whilst perhaps it is still reasonable to say—as commentators did at the advent of ‘the online age’—that non-hierarchical arrangements on the internet are very different to capitalist impositions of control and enclosure, it is sobering to reflect at this time that the empire has

*So—the inconvenient truth is that being media literate has no necessary relation to ‘good agency.’*

struck back pretty well in profiting from “the dialectic between autonomy and exploitation” (Wittel, 2016: 59). However, some rich sites for conflict are presented in this dialectical space with radical opportunities in each for media literacy educators: the open source web; the ‘Free Culture’ movement; new publishing modes (and associated activism against the commodifying, metric hierarchy corporate practices of Academia and ResearchGate); the Digital Commons and alternative education movements.

Networks, in this taxonomy, are understood as ‘thought collectives,’ of which two are in clear opposition. On one side, the neoliberal hegemony, itself a network of ideology, reliant on a first-order accep-



tance of the market and second-order state policy of opening everything up to it—in Žižek’s terms, the market *as* ideology ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavoj\\_Žižek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavoj_Žižek)). On the other side, the commons, a contribution economy, whereby we give to one another our progressive ideas and resources (in our context, for media literacy teaching) and accept that some give more than others (as opposed to a gift economy, which requires reciprocal exchange). The commons, for the second thought collective, is given priority over the market as a ‘natural order’:

*The network of the activist thought collective needs spaces to meet and to talk. It will be another challenge to make these gatherings possible. We need them regularly, we need them on a global scale and we need them to be funded. We also need these gatherings to be free from the usual constraints of academic conferences, which are designed not to foster but to hinder the free circulation of ideas. (Wittel, 2016: 85)*

In an optimistic presentation of research into American youth activism mobilized by network media, Jenkins (2016) offers a hopeful lens for seeing ‘networked publics’ as productively disruptive:

*These models push against the individuality of personalizing logics of neoliberalism. Networked publics depend on social connections among participants and often demand that we care about the plight of others. (2016: 269)*

However, many of the movements studied in the collection might be considered mile-wide, inch-deep in the sense of being short term ‘crash-and-burn’ impacts on the order of things, which returns to equilibrium having allowed sufficient resistance for the centre to hold. This resonates with the 2016 Momentum campaign around Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, most definitely charged with network capital, and the politics of which are seductive to us—“*welcome to the mass movement of giving a toss about stuff*”—but with an absence of powerful hybridity as the activist impulses of the Labour movement are increasingly decoupled from the parliamentary party.

This is a quite different form of hegemony to the co-option of networking practices by the political mainstream, however, which Jenkins observes in the US as no surprise, given “these new kinds of civic cultures are developing a new repertoire of mobilization tactics, communication practices and rhetorical genres.” In this sense the (popular) cultural sphere is the transition point (from actor network theory, or the gateway, in Jenkins’ terms) to the political / civic sphere—‘by any media necessary.’

### **Jez We Can Do Media Literacy?**

*Let’s not make the mistake of confusing anti-rhetorical ‘truth-telling’ with actually telling the truth. (Thompson, 2016: 2)*

In that third space for media literacy, we might find a way of dealing with the ‘parataxis’ currently employed by Trump-Farage. Without, though, an explicitly political remit, media literacy will always hit against a neoliberal double bind. On the one hand, we teach theory but only assess the understanding of it, not the putting to work of it for progressive ends. This leads to Media students faithfully ‘applying’ Laura Mulvey’s ‘male-gaze’ theory as a production technique, happily writing about how they objectified females in their music videos. On the other hand, if we merely ‘give voice’ for self-representation we often find young people re-articulating the ‘divide-and-rule’ parataxis we want to oppose. Consider this example from research into audience responses to an exploitative UK documentary about social security claimants, from the *Hard Times Today* project (Bennett and McDougall, 2016a):

“... you’ve got a family, get a job rudeboy, McDonald’s are hiring 24/7, you can clean toilets.” (Community film participant, Back2Back Films, 2014)

During his second leadership campaign, Jeremy Corbyn offered a set of values and a digital-democracy manifesto. Taking both together, he pledged full employment, security at work, an end to privatization of public services, environmental policies framed by social justice objectives, redistribution of wealth, foreign policy based on conflict resolution and human rights, an open knowledge library (free to all), digital platform co-operatives, a Digital Citizen Passport for access to health, welfare, education and housing, open-source licenses for all publicly-funded technology resources and—most prominent for our concerns here—a people’s charter of digital liberty rights and the fostering of popular participation in the democratic process. All of this would be financed by progressive taxation and is thus rendered seemingly unelectable. These pledges ever being government policy and the possibility of aligning them with the educational curriculum via the conduit of media literacy in the UK are pipe dreams, of course. But what if?

We concluded *After the Media* (*After the Media: Culture and Identity in the 21st Century* by Peter Bennett, Alex Kendall, Julian McDougall; Routledge) and started *Doing Text* (Bennett and McDougall, 2011, 2016b Auteur) with a set of questions for students to work with when trying to do media literacy for radical change. For those projects, the progressive outcomes are intended to be a greater reflexive and curatorial engagement with textual lifeworlds, political in the CCCS tradition—understanding popular culture as a site of struggle and resisting neoliberal agendas for canonical, protectionist and economic modalities for media literacy. In the latter project we were providing practical implementation of the themes of *After the Media* in a ‘third space’ notion of the extended classroom. But here, for this article, these framing questions are ‘Corbynised’ to make them work for this hypothetically direct left-wing counter-script, for ‘good agency.’ The original questions are followed here by the ‘neoliberal fucking,’ in italics:

What is a text? What is the difference between a text and an event? *How does the*

*status of a media text and reactions to it reproduce or challenge social hierarchies, exploitation and cultural alienation? **How can this be different? What will you do about it to make change happen?***

How would you describe your textual experience? What does it look and sound and/or feel like? *How do media give you opportunities to connect, represent / be represented, develop as a person? **What will you do to fight media power when they misrepresent and deny social justice?***

What different kinds of spaces and places are there for consuming and producing textual meaning? *How do these textual media spaces enable or obstruct equality, rights, plurality of representations, collective action? **What will you do to create radical textual spaces?***

What does it mean to be a producer or consumer in these spaces and places? *Who has a voice through media? Who is in the margins? How open (to all) are these media spaces? **How will you use media to increase plurality and fair representation for social justice?***

What different kinds of associations and affiliations do you make? Who with? What for? **How will these mediated associations translate into collective action to change things and challenge power?**

How do you understand the idea of authoring? *What is being creative? Who has access to these actions, who is denied? **How can you work with new modes of media production to fight power structures?***

How do you represent yourself in different spaces and places? *How do these representations compare to mainstream media, how is social justice enabled or denied? How are women, LGBT, disabled people represented? **What will you do to support fairer media representation of people across society?***

How might we need to re-think the traditional categories of learning: reading and writing, speaking and listening? *How have these categories previously stopped people from having a voice? How will YOUR thinking differently about literacy to include digital media lead to a redistribution of cultural capital?*

In a recent thesis on the decline of the neoliberal grand narrative in the wake of austerity, Brexit and Trump's candidacy, Martin Jacques observes:

*One of the reasons why the left has failed to emerge as the leader of the new mood of working-class disillusionment is that most social democratic parties became, in varying degrees, disciples of neoliberalism and uber-globalisation. (2016: 32)*

I would level the same charge at the media literacy movement. Media literacy is currently nothing necessarily to do with civic or political agency but has quite a lot to do with protectionist deficit models and subsequently unintended marginalization, reproducing hierarchies of cultural capital by associating literacy with 'enrichment' and signing up to corporate imperatives to develop '21st century skills' to fuel the uber-global economy, in Jacques' words. Personally, despite my writing here, I am still deeply skeptical about this (civic) agency project for media educators. Where it happens, it tends to be in third spaces, not in formal education. In those spaces there is usually

*I am still deeply skeptical about this (civic) agency project for media educators. Where it happens, it tends to be in third spaces, not in formal education.*

a political objective, whether stated or not. This political objective is usually left wing, whether the facilitators would be comfortable with the term or not. The outcomes tend to be a resistant energy towards neoliberal media representations and a counter-script to seemingly neutral functional versions of media literacy. Either way, if you're going to try, as UNESCO and GAPMIL and others—with good intentions—are, to make a connection between media literacy and civic

engagement for social justice, then 'go the whole hog.' To that end, in this piece I have put some cards on the table by way of articulating what a transparently radical, shamelessly left-wing, and in the UK context 'Corbynistic' media literacy for 'good agency' might look like if only *Jez we could!* ❄

*[With thanks to Ashley Woodfall]*

## REFERENCES

- Back2Back Films. Benefits Street: Back2Back Opinions. Birmingham 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUFdGuSXw3I>
- Bennett, P, Kendall, A and McDougall, J (2011) *After the Media: Culture and Identity in the 21st Century*. London: Routledge.
- Bennett, P and McDougall, J (eds) (2016a) *Popular Culture and the Austerity Myth: Hard Times Today*. New York: Routledge.
- Bennett, P and McDougall, J (eds) (2016b) *Doing Text: Media After the Subject*. Leighton-Buzzard: Auteur.
- Gutierrez, K. (2008). Developing a sociocritical literacy in the third space. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43(2), 148–164
- Jacques, M (2016) 'The Death of Neoliberalism and the Crisis in Western Politics'. *The Observer*, 21.8.16 31-33.
- Jenkins, H (2016) (ed) *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*. New York: New York University Press.
- Livingstone, S and Sefton-Green, J (2016) *The Class: Living and Learning in a Digital Age*. New York; New York University Press.
- McDougall, J, Berger R, Fraser, P and Zezulkova, M (2015) 'Media Literacy, Education & (Civic) Capability: A Transferable Methodology' in *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 7(1), 4 -17:
- McDougall, J and Readman, M (2015) 'Mediating the civic imperative'. Jackson, D and Thorsen, E (eds) *UK Election Analysis 2015: Media, Voters and the Campaign, Reflections from UK Academics*. 33-22. Bournemouth: CSJCC.
- Herrero-Diz, P (2015) Review of 'Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen: Youth, Engagement and Participation in Digital Culture' / interview with Paul Mihailidis. *Media Education Research Journal* 5.2: 112-114.
- Potter, J and McDougall, J (forthcoming, 2017) *Digital Media, Education and Culture: Theorising Third Space Literacy*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Salzburg Global Seminar (2016) MOVE <https://move.community/>
- Sleaford Mods *Tweet Tweet Tweet* Cologne: Harbinger 2014
- Springer, S (2016). 'Fuck Neoliberalism'. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 2016, 15(2): 285-292
- Thompson, M (2016) 'They've got away with words'. *The Guardian Review*, 27.8.16: 2-4
- Unesco (2016): Riga Recommendations on Media and Information Literacy in a Shifting Media and Information Landscape: [http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/riga\\_recommendations\\_on\\_media\\_and\\_information\\_literacy.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/Events/riga_recommendations_on_media_and_information_literacy.pdf)
- Wittel, A (2016) *Digital Transitions*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing.

# Media Literacy That Excludes a Planet at Risk is Not Agency

By **Barrie Zwicker**

**Barrie Zwicker** is an independent documentary producer, author and social and political activist. For seven years he taught two courses, Media & Society, and Media, Ethics and the Law, at Ryerson University in Toronto. For 15 years, at Vision TV, the world's first multi-faith TV channel, Zwicker was the sole resident media critic in Canada. His 2006 book, *Towers of Deception: The Media Cover-Up of 9/11*, earned Gold in the Current Affairs category of the Independent Publishers Awards. The book includes Zwicker's 75-minute documentary DVD *The Great Conspiracy: The 9/11 News Special You Never Saw*.



[McLuhan] [media literacy] [Hayakawa] [activism] [critical thinking]

*The closer one gets to details, the more likely one is to be wrong.*<sup>1</sup> —George Friedman

The editors of this theme issue took a delightfully haphazard approach to defining agency. “You are welcome to write about your *definition* and exercise of *agency* as an author, teacher, observer, blogger, presenter, activist, etc. At its leanest, *agency is knowledge in action.*” (my emphases)

Good thing, because I'm ambivalent about received definitions, and also somewhat allergic to high

abstractions, including *agency, knowledge* and *action*. But I only break out in a rash in the presence of high abstractions when *more specific* terms are available. (Obviously I'm not allergic to italics!)

The editors could hardly avoid using the high abstraction *agency* in the context of explaining this issue's theme. So they're off the hook. I'm not. To be consistent I begin near the bottom of the four-rung “abstraction ladder” originated in *Lan-*

*guage in Thought and Action* (S.I. Hayakawa). (In the accompanying illustration of an abstraction ladder, “Derek Hughes” is a fictional person representing the smallest indivisible unit. “Education” represents the most abstract entity).

Accordingly my four incision points into *agency* are specific *projects* (although in the final project I return to the ladder with a twist that may surprise).

## Project 1: A Poll Is Born

### Background

From the outset of my seven years teaching a *Media & Society* course at Ryerson University, I carried my skepticism about conventional education with me. Partly this was learned from my father, an ordained progressive preacher. Each Fall he took me out of school to dig potatoes in his large garden, explaining to an uncomplaining me that there are paths to learning well outside school. That was a big lesson taught in a potato patch 70 years ago. It was reinforced during the three years I attended Marshall McLuhan's Monday night seminars in the late 60s and early 70s. It was the one I applied as a journalism teacher that remains with me today.

So in *Media & Society* my 130-odd students and myself began each week in plenary with a guest speaker (they were outsiders or “anti-environments,” as Mc-



Luhan might call them). They ranged from humble cogs in the wheels of journalism such as newspaper copy editors, to the leading lights of the Canadian media of the day including Pierre Berton, June Callwood and Patrick Watson.<sup>2</sup>

Each week, on the days following that week's plenary, I encouraged *projects* related to what the speaker had shared—*action* arising from *knowledge*.

### The project

This one began with a public opinion pollster. In the following seminars I asked the students to decide on a subject to poll about, to write the poll questions, conduct the poll and write a report.

The pollster generously agreed to return to the campus to look over the students' draft questions and suggest better ones. The students then took to the streets of the city—the potato patch—to ask the ques-

er of the *Committee for an Independent Canada* (CIC).<sup>3</sup>

The *raison d'être* for the project was one of the twin concerns of the CIC (known today as the Council of Canadians). These concerns were, and remain today: repatriating the Canadian economy from U.S. domination and resisting the U.S. Empire's cultural steamroller.

This was a large canvas for a bunch of first-year journalism students and their prof.

Because of Hurtig's newsworthiness and my open bias in favour of his mission, I issued a campus-wide invitation to his talk. The hall was packed. Hurtig was inspiring. For my part I was inspired to invite any of my students to join me in establishing a Ryerson Chapter of the CIC. Thirty-three did. The journalism department chair, the late J. D. MacFarlane, blessed this initiative. Looking back it's clear that without MacFarlane as a champion, without his support of *agency* (a.k.a. *activism*) it's doubtful the Ryerson CIC chapter could or would have been formed and gone on to achieve the surprising outcome that it did.

The students and I chose a chapter mission relevant to our interests and strengths. We committed to more than study. We committed to activism, *agency* if you will. As a result, the Ryerson chapter of the CIC became *de facto* the CIC's national media activism chapter.

### The Project

Arguably the most vexed issue in the world of Canadian journalism and publishing at the time were the special privileges enjoyed by foreign-operated periodicals, notably *Time* and *Reader's Digest*.<sup>4</sup>

The powerful pair enjoyed substantial tax benefits and subsidized postal rates meant for domestic publishers, to an extent where their circulation was 51% of total Canadian periodical circulation and the pair soaked up the lion's share of periodical advertising revenue, sending staggering profits home—\$14 million for the two magazines in 1974.

The special privileges were a spermicide on the birth of new Canadian periodicals, stultified the growth of existing Canadian periodicals and murdered others. All this enabled *Time* "Canada," as its founder Henry Luce said, to: "...exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purposes as we see fit and by such means as we see fit."

## Media literacy work that fails to address the key issues of ownership and control of the media is not as industrial strength as it should be.

tions. I asked the editors at *The Toronto Star* to consider publishing a student-written story based on the poll results. The editors agreed to consider. The students wrote. *The Star* published. Project completed.

I like to think that my students, in their subsequent work in the mainstream media, would be more sensitive about—or better still, critical of—polling questions. That would be *critical thinking*, applied in their post-graduation practical professional settings. I'd call that *agency* at work within the area of media literacy.

### Project 2: Elite Media Successfully Challenged

#### Background



Media literacy work that fails to address the key issues of ownership and control of the media is not as industrial strength as it should be.<sup>5</sup> Another invited speaker was Mel Hurtig, at the time a founder and a prime mov-

The timing of the Ryerson chapter's launching its mission was right. The Liberal government of the day was somewhat nationalistic; the special privileges anachronistic.

First, chapter members educated themselves about the issue.

Next, a petition signed by all chapter members was sent to Prime Minister Pierre-Elliott Trudeau urging repeal of the special privileges. A letter-writing blitz followed. Each Member of Parliament was sent a personally composed letter on the issue.

After the letter-writing, a demonstration was held outside the downtown Toronto offices of *Time "Canada."* Placards read "Time is not of the essence, Canada is," "*Time out*" and so forth.

This activism—along with the efforts of other media literate activist Canadians—made a difference at the federal cabinet table. Secretary of State Hugh Faulkner introduced Bill C-58 into the House of Commons to remove the privileges.

Bill C-58 received Royal Assent. The privileges were no more. *Time "Canada"* decided to abandon its so-called Canadian edition. This enabled *Maclean's* magazine, until then a monthly, to blossom into weekly publication. *Maclean's* prospers to this day.

The students' involvement in research, their choosing activism from petitioning to letter-writing to demonstrations, and the subsequent satisfaction of seeing their labours bear fruit I would classify as exercising *agency* with a capital A.

### **Project 3: A Granddaughter, Bruce Jenner and Terrorism**

#### **Background**

Media literacy is mandated in Ontario, to the extent that Ontario is a world leader.

A lion's share of the credit must go to the late Barry Duncan. Duncan's life agency was focused on media literacy. He was chair of the writing team for the path-breaking *Media Literacy Resource Guide*. From the Rationale:

*The media...provide not only information about the world, but also ways of seeing and understanding it... Media literacy enables*

*teachers and students to challenge the great inequalities in knowledge and power that exist between those who manufacture information in their own interests and those who consume it innocently as news or entertainment.*

This article resonates strongly with that outlook. From Duncan's time through to today, a good deal of the credit for the extent to which media literacy is taught in Ontario schools goes to determined media literacy leaders such as Neil Andersen and Carol Arcus, co-editors of this *JML* issue.

So Andersen was pleased to learn that our granddaughter Leah receives at least one 40-minute period of media literacy daily. Her teacher had told the class:

*Her teacher had told the class: "We don't know who discovered water but we know it wasn't a fish."*

"We don't know who discovered water but we know it wasn't a fish." This is a fairly well-known McLuhan aphorism that many or most adults would not have heard.

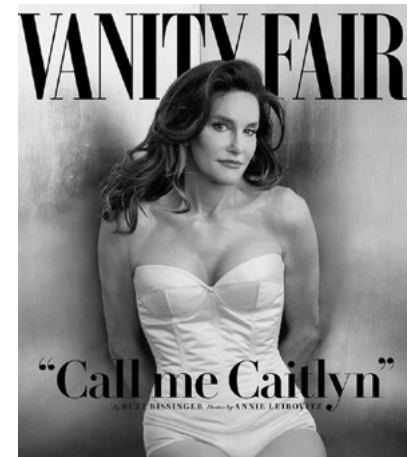
#### **The Project**

I offered myself as a guest at one of Leah's media literacy classes. The teacher agreed that we focus on stereotyping.

I was introduced only as "Leah's grandfather." Not a word more. The idea was to provide as little information as possible upon which the grades 7/8s could build a stereotype.

I asked the students what they thought stereotyping meant and asked for examples. They were in the ballpark. Their examples mostly involved gender and race. This was when I learned most of them knew who Bruce Jenner

was<sup>8</sup> and that she had been on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in a curvy dress with the headline: "Call me Caitlyn."



A welcome challenge came from a girl who corrected me when I referred to Jenner alternately as “she” and “he.” I was still conflicted, but the student had accepted Jenner’s sex change. She said: “Sir, you keep saying ‘he.’ That’s wrong. It’s ‘she.’” I thanked her sincerely. I hope there was a lesson there for the class: that being corrected is a gift and critical thinking should be welcomed. That student was *exercising agency*—in this case involving a part of speech.

I suggested that the most powerful stereotype in the world currently is “terrorist.” They had no problem accepting it. This took us into deep waters, including Trevor Aaronson’s TED Talk (*The Terror Factory: Inside the FBI’s Manufactured War on Terrorism*) (<http://bit.ly/2ipsn9S>). His first words are: “The FBI is responsible for more terrorism plots in the United States than any other organization. More than Al Qaeda, more than Al-Shabaab, more than the Islamic State—more than all of them combined.”

Aaronson, associate director and co-founder of the non-profit *Florida Center for Investigative Reporting*, shows “how the FBI has, under the guise of engaging in counterterrorism since 9/11, built a network of more than fifteen thousand informants whose pri-

mill projects are, well, run-of-the-mill. Risky projects in my experience have been much more educative, engaging and fun for all concerned.

#### Project 4: This article

#### Background

Mainstream and so-called “alternative” media failings can be assigned rungs on a ladder of abstractions. On the bottom rung—Hayakawa’s Level 1—are the smallest indivisible units of media *failings*: typos, mis-spellings, incorrect grammar, minor factual errors, sloppy headlines and the like.

At Level 2 are systemic *identifiable biases* regarding, for instance, race, gender, class and so on.

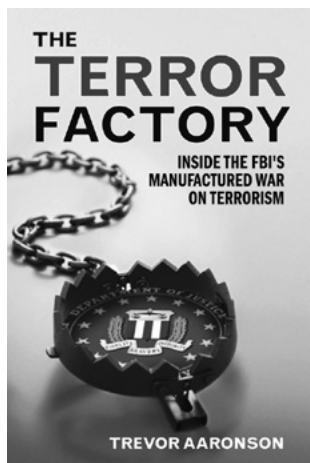
At Level 3 are harder-to-identify *unarticulated major premises*. These include, for instance, that promotion of infotainment, consumerism and capitalism are acceptable as news. These premises are embedded in clusters of subject matter including whole newspaper sections (travel, automobiles and “entertainment”).

Existing at Level 4, the highest abstraction level, is the most critical *as well as the most hidden* failing of the media in general. By “media” I mean Western, especially American, mainstream newspapers, websites, radio and TV news, and accompanying opinion columns and commentary.

In the media, so defined, I refer to a dangerous and misleading worldview, a worldview currently dominated by the so-called “war on terror.” When this worldview is absorbed and accepted as the always-threatening “way things are,” it frightens millions into a more easily-manipulatable mass. It creates chronic anxiety. It goes a long way toward justifying wars. It benefits the elite of (less than) 1% and disempowers the more than 99%.

The presentation of this worldview harnesses virtually all the powers of media. They then effectively function as instruments of the 1%’s agenda. Most hidden of all: this misleading worldview is not a matter of the media *failing*. It’s a matter of the media *succeeding*—for the agenda’s perpetrators.

So rather than calling it a worldview, which denotes observation, this almost evidence-free *perceptual-only* “reality” should be termed a *world of illusion*—



*Preparations I made for that class, the class experience and reflections since show a major advantage of agency for those initiating projects, especially controversial ones, in the field of media literacy.*

mary purpose is to infiltrate Muslim communities to create and facilitate phony terrorist plots so that the bureau can then claim victory in the War on Terror.” (<http://amzn.to/2hETGjh>)

The students were open to this information. The class makeup, like that of Toronto, is diverse and includes Muslims.<sup>9</sup>

Preparations I made for that class, the class experience and reflections since show a major advantage of agency for those initiating projects, especially controversial ones, in the field of media literacy. Run-of-the-



one invisible as illusion for those who accept it.

Why is the American-controlled financial powerhouse the IMF named the *International Monetary Fund*? Why is the IMF agenda, which can be summed up in two words—deregulation and austerity—called “neoliberalism” rather than, say, “neoconservatism” or “in the service of global capitalism”?

From oligarchy to international finance to moviedom to TV to baseball and at thousands of points between, questions about the *status quo*—about what Peter Dale Scott calls the politics of the “Deep State”—cannot arise in a politically relevant form for most people, because they are in thrall of the illusion.

This is in large part, I submit, because of the media’s hidden major premises as well as *de facto* censorship. For instance, the omission of questioning, let alone investigative journalism, about the assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy, from the time of his assassination to the present day. There are all too many examples of other deep-state crimes against democracy or SCADs—a term invented by Lance deHaven-Smith, author of *Conspiracy Theory in America*. Evidence of these crimes is censored out and replaced by false or hidden histories.

Consequently political involvement, or *agency*, a prerequisite for societal change, is at an all-time low.

## The Project

This article itself is the final project. At its heart I argue that most media literacy studies and projects fail at the highest level, Level 4, paradoxically in parallel with the intentional “failure” by the media at that Level.

I am saying that the questioning referred to above, unless I am mistaken, is generally absent or discouraged in classrooms and, it seems to me, even in media literacy circles. I appreciate this is a very serious criticism, and acknowledge that there are no doubt some brave enough to risk it.

A key concept in, for instance, the Ontario media studies curriculum, is that “all media are constructions.” But would this concept lead a media literacy teacher to engage with the concept of “the world as it is?” Maybe. But failure to see that these five words describe, like the shadows on Plato’s cave, a virtually bogus media environment is arguably the

most important missing dimension in media literacy studies, judging for instance by most back issues of *JML*. As it is missing, by the way, in most psychological, sociological and historical studies. Academe as a whole is missing in action in interrogating the established order. A worthwhile documentary dealing with this is Adnan Zuberi’s *9-11 in the Academic Community*.<sup>10</sup>

Zuberi’s critique clearly applies to media literacy studies. The first two interview clips underscore this. Prof Graeme MacQueen of McMaster University in Hamilton<sup>11</sup> states: “It’s ... profoundly disappointing ... how universities manage to ignore deeply important questions. And after 40 years in the institution you get to see what those are...”

He’s followed by Prof. David MacGregor of Western University in London, Ontario: “...my friend Peter Dale Scott talks about Deep Events. He talks about events which we don’t spend too much time trying to understand but we try in a sense not to understand, events which make a huge impact on the way we live, but we stop thinking about them, almost as soon as they happen.”

Insofar as agency in media literacy studies, and teaching, *repeatedly* fails to grapple with the largest understandings we can muster, the promise of agency is undelivered. If in media literacy we devote most of our energies, time and foci on technology (Level 1) or negotiation of meaning (Level 2) or educational strategies (Level 3) we risk failing to reach Level 4 or “the big picture,” to use an overworked term almost always used to describe smaller pictures.

In elaborating, I am obligated to climb down one rung here from the abstractions “the big picture” or “world,” to a smaller but still large abstraction, “war.” This lends itself to study from a media point of view, as numerous studies have.

This abstraction, war, moreover, is timely, urgent and literally a matter of life and death. I’m suggesting here that we who are media critics/teachers should find current wars and threats of wars to be compelling, alarming and motivating.

Planetary threats can be raised in classrooms, given a dedication to courageous agency by media literacy teachers. Imagine the class discussion on the subject of war and the media using the following quote from Pope Francis:

Time, my brothers and sisters, seems to be running out; we are not yet tearing one another apart, but we are tearing apart our common home. Today, the scientific community realizes what the poor have long told us: harm, perhaps irreversible harm, is being done to the ecosystem. The earth, entire peoples and individual persons are being brutally punished. And behind all this pain, death and destruction there is the stench of what Basil of Caesarea called “the dung of the devil.” An *unfettered pursuit of money rules over the entire socioeconomic system* [my emphasis], it ruins society, it condemns and enslaves men and women, it destroys human fraternity, it sets people against one another and, as we clearly see, it even puts at risk our common home.

Now *that* is “big-picture” grasp. As opined regarding the Pope’s statement at <http://bit.ly/2iR9kIs>: “And don’t forget S&P 500 at all time highs. Because the New Normal, where apparently world war news is the best imaginable news for risk assets.”

It’s axiomatic that agency in media studies requires critical thinking about media. But because media and their effects are global, this critical thinking must address global issues. Not least in the areas of geopolitics, militarism, war, international finance and global climate change. The effectiveness of media lit-

After these are determined, next come aims and objectives, and after that strategies. Today’s world of speed-up and scale-up must be apprehended on the largest canvas we can grasp: of life on the planet being at risk within a very short time, geologically speaking. Media literacy work, like all other work, should interrogate establishment powers and traditions—essentially responsible for the pickle we’re in—sound alarms and promote solutions.

A case can be made, I submit, that those dedicated to media literacy studies can be more effective by deploying Marshall McLuhan’s “probes” and becoming “provocateurs” or even “subversives,” crossing swords with the time-stealing, mind-manipulating, death-dealing *status quo*.

A myriad of starting points are available to the teacher. As already suggested, the stereotype “terrorist” is an instrument of massive deception, a la 1984. A keynote term, it’s ready-made, available for student deconstruction in virtually every news report every day. “We” are corralled mentally to see the Muslim kids in my granddaughter’s class as potential “home-grown terrorists.”

Or take the topical and timely phenom *Pokemon Go* as a starting point. It’s presented by the media as a harmless and indeed educational game of fun, wonder and exploration. The educative value of *Pokemon Go* in the classroom lays in exposing its deceptive aspect, its dark lure for Big Brother data harvesting. (<http://bit.ly/2hEYkh6>)

The ongoing world of illusion is fabricated, reinforced and re-reinforced so relentlessly, is so nearly universally embedded, that it paralyzes citizens’ understanding of their own agency in the world. Even media-critical fish can swim in this world without knowing it’s the water of McLuhan’s aphorism.

Resolved: “That to the extent that media literacy studies fail to address this world of illusion they fail to exercise agency appropriate to today’s human condition.” A debate on this resolution would make a provocative media literacy project, from grade school through to post-graduate. ✱

*The ongoing world of illusion is fabricated, reinforced and re-reinforced so relentlessly, is so nearly universally embedded, that it paralyzes citizens’ understanding of their own agency in the world.*

eracy studies and teaching therefore rests on the size of the canvas we work on. Friedman’s quote is provocative in this regard.

Or put another way: how courageous is our introspection about our *media literacy* work as it relates to planetary survival? The media literacy project, I argue, must start with delineating not our project aims and objectives, but our project boundaries.

## FOOTNOTES

1 I'm indebted to Carol Arcus, one of the editors of this issue, for making me aware of this quote.

2 For readers who don't know who these people are: Berton ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre\\_Berton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre_Berton)) from his start as the youngest city editor of a major daily at the time, went on to become arguably the country's most noted daily columnist (in the *Toronto Star*), then edited the country's largest magazine, became an innovative fixture for years on radio and TV and wrote 50 books, many best sellers. June Callwood was a crack magazine feature writer and author who uniquely married writing and political activism, especially on behalf of downtrodden women and children, establishing institutions in this field that flourish to this day. Patrick Watson, an early TV genius, invented programs such as "This hour Has Seven Days," so successful in substance and audience size that the governing powers of the day at the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)* had to axe it. He went on to become chairman of the CBC's Board of Governors.

3 Hurtig was an innovative and successful publisher in Edmonton, Alberta, who went on to produce *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. As a publisher, author and activist, he mainly exercised agency in the area of Canadian sovereignty. One of his several books is *The Betrayal of Canada, Stoddart Canada*, 1991, ISBN 0-7737-2542-3] Hurtig passed away on August 3rd, 2016 at age 84, in Vancouver, B.C.

4 Time in 1974 was 100% American owned. RD, seeing the writing on the wall, had by 1974 arranged for 30% Canadian ownership.

5 *Time* "Canada," was launched by *Time* founder Henry Luce in 1943. By 1974 it had a circulation north of the border of 510,000; next largest was *Time Pacific's* 335,000. For a fuller explanation of the *Time/Reader's Digest* issue see *Cultural Sovereignty: The Time and Reader's Digest Case in Canada* by Isaiah Litvak and Christopher Maule, Praeger Publishers, New York, Washington and London, 1974, Library of Congress number PN4914. P4L5 051 73-13342

6 New York, Scribner, ISBN 06841 25927 9780684 125923, OCLC 483381

7 Queen's Printer for Canada, Ottawa, 1970; Catalogue No. YC2-282/3-01

8 In case any readers happen not to know, Jenner is a retired Olympic gold medal-winning decathlete, Jenner revealed her identity as a trans woman in April 2015, publicly announcing her name change from Bruce to Caitlyn in a July 2015 *Vanity Fair* cover story.

9 Toronto was recently recognized by the UN as having the most diverse population in the world. More than 140 languages and dialects are spoken and 47 per cent of Toronto's population (1,162,635 people) report themselves as being part of a visible minority. Half were born outside of Canada.

10 <https://911inacademia.com/2015/10/14/view-the-documentary/>

11 A founder of that university's Centre for Peace Studies.

# A Fresh Look at the Media Literacy Movement

## The National Telemedia Council as an Agent for a Better Future

By Marieli Rowe



**Marieli Rowe** has been the Executive Director of The National Telemedia Council since 1978. She helped expand the organization's newsletter into *The Journal of Media Literacy* and has been the editor since its inception. Her passion for media literacy began with her children, running children's film festivals, serving on boards for public radio, television and cable access, and continues today into the next generation, asking questions about the evolving ecology of childhood and the need for a 21st-century transformational literacy.

---

[National Telemedia Council] [autonomy] [critical thinking] [agency] [transformative literacy] [collaboration] [ecology of childhood]

**A**fter nearly seven decades of working in the field of media literacy, can it be possible for someone to ask me to take a “fresh” look at the movement? If anyone can do that, it is Neil Andersen. When he invited me to contribute my thoughts about “Agency” and media literacy, my first reaction was “Huh?” I struggled with the term and asked for help from Neil, from my son, and from my colleagues. When the “Aha” moment dawned on me, it was an amazing awakening and discovery of a fresh look at who we (NTC) are, what has motivated us, and the clarity of our goals and purpose that have remained through the years.

*Today it is more important than ever to equip and empower our children to be their own best agents. They must know and test, retest, and perhaps change “the waters they swim in.”*

The media literacy movement has always been about change and agency, working to empower our youth to be free, capable, autonomous thinkers and doers. For nearly three generations, the Wisconsin-born *National Telemedia Council* (NTC) has endeavored to be a change agent for media literacy education.

The NTC is the oldest media literacy organization in the United States that is still alive and thriving. Our

official start as the *American Council for Better Broadcasts* began on June 24th, 1953 in Minneapolis at a conference of the American Association of University Women, with delegates from 93 cities and 34 states, representing 18 national organizations, 18 state groups and many local organizations. At the time, we were already twelve years old as a Wisconsin group, collaborating with others from Columbus, Ohio to New York to San Francisco to Baton Rouge, Louisiana and more, before our incorporation as a national organization.

Along with our founding leaders, Dr. Leslie Spence and Jessie McCause, there were important pioneering agents for media literacy who should not be forgotten. At Ohio State University, Dr. Edgar Dale established principles for qualitative evaluation of media. Dr. Louis Forsdale of Columbia University Teachers College wrote about *multimedia literacy* in 1955, potentially coining the term we use today. Working with and in support of our efforts were two influential government representatives: FCC Commissioner Ab-

bott Washburn, eloquently promoting NTC's mission in public appearances and on the commission, and Professor Harry Skornia of the University of Illinois, an international leader in educational broadcasting and the U.S. State Department.



These are just a few of the many who helped form our philosophy and approach. To learn more about their work, see *Telemidium, The Journal of Media Literacy*, Volume 53, No. 1, Summer 2006.

NTC's goal has always been to give agency to every child living in our rapidly changing media environment, to live a life fulfilled through the power and confidence of critical, knowledge-seeking, skeptical (but not cynical) thought. NTC has done this through promoting positive, active media literacy that empowers individuals, and makes it possible to be *in*, not *under* the control of the media.

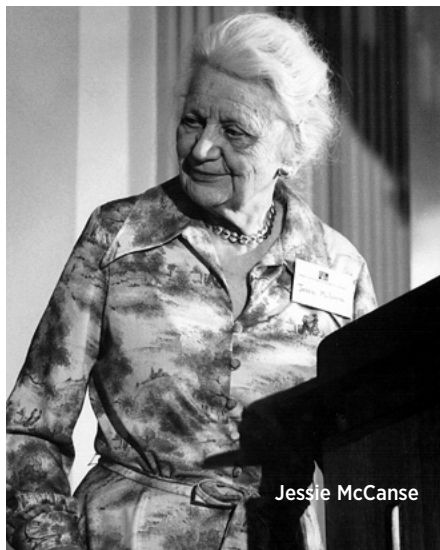
Toward this goal, NTC developed many activities that facilitated agency for participants and members through the years:

- **Broadcast on Broadcasts:** Beginning in the 1940s, we had A Voice on the Air for 25 years in conjunction with the development of Wisconsin Public Radio, lovingly known as "WHA, the oldest station in the nation." Leslie Spence and Jessie McCause hosted the weekly program interviewing media professionals and educators and discussing media issues of the day.
- **The Annual Look Listen Opinion Poll**, our earliest project, was designed to provide *qualitative* evaluation (a first!) of television prime time programming. From 1953 to 1989, a detailed *Look Listen* report, quoting participants' responses, was published each year and shared with broadcasters, government agencies, and the public.
- **Project Postcard**, another early activity, made it possible for viewers to express their opinions about advertising directly to the advertisers through a packet that included penny postcards, address lists of sponsors, and guidelines for comment.
- **Annual Sponsor Recognition Awards** to sponsors of quality programming were an integral component of the above evaluation projects. These awards were based on the comments of viewers and listeners gathered in the *Look Listen Poll* and *Project Postcard*.
- The ACBB (now NTC) held **annual conferences** beginning in 1954 in various locations, hosted by members, often in association with other organizations. While all these conferences were about media literacy, they featured and were named according to a specific theme, e.g., Children, News, etc. The Boone, North Carolina Conference in 1995 was the first time that our stated topic was simply called "Media Literacy." Highlights of our conferences have also included innovative communication means. In 1981, we held *Kids Across Space* via satellite, connecting children in Washington D.C. and Brisbane, Australia. (David Fabie tribute at the end of this article). In 2003, we held an *International Video Conference Forum*, bringing together five media literacy centers in London, Toronto, New York, Madison, and Seattle.
- **The Teacher Idea Exchange** was first published in 1973 and became a regular feature of our organizational newsletter and later *The Journal of Media Literacy*.
- **Week-long summer workshops** for teachers were held at Edgewood College in Madison from 1976 to 1981.
- In 1978, we founded **Kids-4**, a **dedicated children's channel** in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin which is alive and thriving independently today.
- **ACBB/NTC worked with policy-making agents** over the years. In 1979, we made recommendations on the need for critical viewing skills for children to the FCC's inquiry on children's television and advertising practices. We participated in the development of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's policies as members of its advisory council of national organizations.

*For nearly three generations, the Wisconsin-born National Telemedia Council (NTC) has endeavored to be a change agent for media literacy education.*

- *The Journal of Media Literacy* has been and continues to be our voice of agency for the benefit of the media literacy movement. Beginning as a four-page newsletter, published six times a year with news and tips for members, it grew into a journal with a purpose of being a bridge for academic research and practitioners, be they teachers, parents, producers, or activists.
- NTC created the **Jessie McCause award** named in honor of our co-founder. Established in 1987, the award recognizes individual contribution to the media literacy field over a long, sustained period of time of at least ten years. It honors individuals whose contributions exemplify Mrs. McCause's high principles, ethics, and dedication.

Reflecting on the sixty-three year-long span of NTC, I am remembering other vibrant organizations that began in those early decades, but have since ceased to exist. For example, the *National Association For Better Radio And TV* was



headed by Frank Orme in California. Somewhat later, *Action For Children's Television* was started by four mothers in Boston including Evelyn Sarson and Peggy Charren. These organizations were effective during their time. In thinking about our unique longevity, I see certain intrinsic factors that have made it possible:

- **First** and foremost have been our strong basic principles and a philosophy that endures through the changing times.
- **Second**, our commitment to cooperation, collaboration, and valuing giving credit to others where credit is due.
- **Third** is our willingness and ability to

adapt to change and to be flexible.

- **Fourth** is that we keep going with patience and persistence, walking when we cannot fly, and keeping on when the going gets tough.
- **Fifth**, we hold fast to the mission of creating a media-wise, literate global society which means seeking a transformative literacy in a changing world of multiple cultures, moving with the constantly evolving ecology of childhood and the mediated environment.

In thinking about my personal agency, for me it began with the family, the young child and what

*NTC's goal has always been to give agency to every child living in our rapidly changing media environment, to live a life fulfilled through the power and confidence of critical, knowledge-seeking, skeptical (but not cynical) thought.*

I like to call "the evolving ecology of childhood." In the mid 1950s, when my family moved back to the United States after having lived in Switzerland for four years with two toddlers, I was troubled by the uninvited babysitter coming into my children's lives. Here was Captain Kangaroo instructing my boys to "Tell your mommy to go and buy Wonder Bread." At first, we had thought we would not need to have a television in our home, but it didn't take very long for our boys to toddle to the neighbor's house. We came to realize it would be better to have this new box in our own home where we could teach and manage their media experiences. It was the beginning of an awareness that I had never before come across. At about that time, I became acquainted with and volunteered for the ACBB's first *Children's Film Festival*, which was designed to provide quality programming beginning at the preschool age. Some sixty plus years later, my philosophy and mission remain steadfast amidst relentless and accelerating change.

Today it is more important than ever to equip and empower our children to be their own best agents.

They must know and test, retest, and perhaps change “the waters they swim in.” (S.I. Hayakawa)

We as parents, teachers, and all concerned (and that includes broadcasters, citizens, activists, etc.) are privileged to fill our children’s backpacks with the best for their voyage through the adventure of life. The earlier we begin, the better it is. The more we give them the trust, the more we enable their autonomy. With this ability to exercise agency for themselves, they will experience the joy of an enlightened journey through life.

And so for me, exercising agency for media literacy has become a passion of great urgency. The increasingly rapid and pervasive progress of the electronic information age is changing our Culture. It is a change of equal, if not greater significance than global warming and the environment.

To give agency to our youth and the generations of tomorrow means empowering them ...

- to meet the challenges and explore the joys of media through higher-order thinking skills
- to recognize manipulation and seek truth
- to acknowledge point of view and listen, with open mind, yet critical thought
- to make the connection between media and all the Arts
- to create, to perform, to flourish, whether in music, the visual, or performing arts
- and to build those never-before-seen or heard-of visions for tomorrow!

This will ensure a culture in which people are capable of being in control of their autonomy and destiny. That is a privilege indeed and a path worth living.

It is really all about “making a difference,” or in the words of a wonderful French priest...a friend of my mother’s who perished in the French underground during the Nazi invasions...

“Il faut toujours ajouter au monde.” ❄

*\*I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the indispensable contributions of Karen Ambrosh, Neil Andersen, and Bill Rowe to this article.*



“KIDS—Across Space” via Satellite, the 1981 event in progress: on stage, David Fabie (2nd from right) leads the US-Australia live interactive exchange (see story on next page).

*We hold fast to the mission of creating a media-wise, literate global society which means seeking a transformative literacy in a changing world of multiple cultures, moving with the constantly evolving ecology of childhood and the mediated environment.*

# A Tribute to NTC and KIDS-4, The Sun Prairie, Wisconsin Children's Channel

A letter from David Fabie Remembering the 1986 "Kids Across Space" event.

David Fabie grew up in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, where he was a young member of the original "KIDS-4", the pioneering Sun Prairie project of "television by and for" children aged 9-14. The hands-on project, conceived in the 1970s, was a vibrant collaboration that included the new medium of Cable TV, the community, schools, local government, and the media literacy education ideas of NTC (then known as the American Council for Better Broadcasts).

Teachers, parents, and professionals from cable and local government volunteered to bring to life the innovative children's channel which still thrives to this day. Mr. Fabie, now living and working in London, U.K., shared his memories, on the 35th anniversary of the Landmark 1981 "KIDS ACROSS SPACE" event in a Facebook comment which we gratefully reproduce here with his permission, as an example of lifelong Agency at its best.

**T**hey say the worst thing you can have in live television is "dead air". Suddenly in front of a room full of government and media dignitaries, with broadcasting history literally hanging in the balance, that is exactly what we were facing. Dead air.

The date was Thursday, October 15th, 1981. Two days earlier, I had boarded an Amtrak train in Columbus, Wisconsin, along with Mike Daugherty, John Garrett, Tom Gehrman, Chris Kerwin, Anne O'Brien, Becky Weirough, Glenn Zweig, Steve Funk, and Mike Kennedy. Now in the ballroom of the Capital Hill Holiday Inn in Washington D.C. a live satellite demonstration, linking our group of American kids, and a group of young people in Brisbane Australia had just gone live on the air.

The two groups were kids who shared the unique experience of being media users, not just media consumers. A group us from the "Kids 4" television project in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, A group from the KIDS ALIVE! Project in Bloomington, Indiana, were having a live cultural exchange via satellite with a group of young people from down under in Australia, who hosted the popular children's program WOMBAT.

The kids from the Australian television show went first, showing an amazing video montage of their studio, the gold coast of Australia and the stories they produced there at Channel 7 in Brisbane. Then it was our turn. Or so we thought. Kerri Brinson from KIDS ALIVE!, from Bloomington Indiana looked in the

camera and cheerfully announced; "Well, here's our video montage!"

And ... nothing.

A technician from COX Cable Television, hurried into the room and whispered in the ear of a nearby adult that the Video tape player in the satellite truck, was not working, and therefore none of the prepared footage we had brought with us to Washington could be shown. So we proceeded to do what we always did when doing live television. We improvised. The kids from Indiana looked at us like we were nuts. They were not used to working live. One of the great things about the Kids 4 program is we started out doing all of our shows live. It was only after two years we switched to recording them first, then airing them.

Still, with a ballroom full of dignitaries watching you, plus trying to fill an entire hour with stuff off the top your head, AND cope with at least a 5 second time delay between you and the people you were trying to interview, it was bit tense, even by our standards.

The end result however, was amazing. That one technical glitch turned what would have been a largely scripted exchange into an actual conversation. Asking each other about school, about hobbies and what was it about working with television that interested them, as well as sharing our own experiences as kids learning to use media and not be used by it.

Of course at the time, it felt like a disaster.

Looking back on that day, thirty five years ago,



I marvel at how much the world has changed. At the time, what we were doing in Washington DC that day was not all that remarkable from a technical standpoint. Live satellite broadcasts were hardly a rarity in 1981. Yet from a cultural and educational standpoint, the Kids-to-Kids interconnect was nothing short of revolutionary.

The Interconnect didn't radically change the media landscape, or advance broadcast technology. What it did do, was in the space of a few short hours make the world a remarkably smaller place. It showed that live satellite broadcasting could be used for more than breaking news and sporting events. More than that, it laid the foundation for the type of personal interconnectivity that today, we take completely for granted.

As much as I say that live satellite television was commonplace in 1981, that isn't to say the mechanics of it were simple. The path of the satellite interconnect—from Washington, D.C. to , Brisbane, Australia was a complex series of relays starting with a signal carried by cable to a Cox Cable production truck parked just outside in the courtyard of the hotel. From there, the Mobil-Video Company (MV) picked up the signal in its truck parked next to the Cox truck, and carried it via microwave across town to PBS Headquarters at L'Enfant Plaza.

PBS then took over sending the signal to its satellite ground station outside Washington, D.C., which then sent the signal up to the Western Union Satellite, WESTAR I, 22,300 miles above the Earth's surface. THEN, the WESTAR I, transmitted the signal to the satellite receiving dish at Sans Francisco's PBS station KQED, and via microwave (Using AT&T facilities) to COMSAT's earth station at Jamesburg, California. At Jamesburg, COMSAT picked up the signal and transmitted it up to the Pacific Ocean INTELSAT satellite which relayed it down to the an earth station at Moree near Sydney Australia.

Finally from there the signal travelled via land lines (microwave) to the studios of Channel 7, Brisbane, where the Australian children received it and responded. Their messages back to the U.S. travelled in the reverse direction using landlines and a second transponder on the INTELSAT satellite to Jamesburg, and back to San Francisco via AT&T microwave. Then back to Washington via Western Union's WESTAR III satellite, then directly to the on-site satellite dish locat-

ed in the courtyard of the Capitol Holiday Inn. Then back into the conference room where it was seen on large screen receivers by all of us there.

Whew! Did you follow all that? Don't worry, there won't be a quiz. But here is what you need to know, everything that I just described, in all its complicated glory, the average teenager can now do with the phone they carry in their pocket. No trucks needed, no delay and now we don't even think twice about it. I know this because I do it nearly every day.

I live in London and at least three times a week I will facetime, or skype or Periscope or Facebook live, or viber video call with friends and family scattered all over the globe. From my in-laws in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to my parents in Madison, Wisconsin, and dozens of friends at dozens more points in between.

The interconnect was the truly the first global face-time session .

The greatest take away from that day for those of us fortunate enough to have been part of it, was the power of broadcast technology to bridge distances and connect people in new and exciting ways. It was, at least for one thirteen year old, a life changing experience. A live demonstration of the power of broadcast technology to connect people and be a platform for sharing experiences and ideas, in (nearly) real time.

Those lessons of the Interconnect are even more important today than they were three decades ago. In a world where if kids in Sun Prairie want to talk to kids in Brisbane, all they need is a smart phone and a decent Wi-Fi signal; Media Literacy is more crucial now than ever before. Teaching young people how to harness the power of media, and connectivity as tools for education and empowerment is more important today, than it has ever been.

Teaching young people to be media users, not just media consumers has always been at heart of the mission of Kids 4 and The National Telemedia Council. That mission, which took a gigantic step forward in 1981 continues today.

Thirty-five years on, it remains an experience that played a tremendous role in shaping my path in life. I can't thank you enough for having been allowed to be part of it. ❀

*David Fabie  
London, Huffington Post UK*

# The Birth, Death and Resurrection of a Subject Association

Robyn Quin and Barrie McMahon



**Robyn Quin** was the founding president of ATOM (WA—[Western Australia]). She has had a distinguished career as a teacher, media studies consultant and academic. Together with Barrie McMahon she has written several texts for teachers and students on media education.



**Barrie McMahon** played a significant role in the development of media studies courses in Western Australian schools. In 2013 he received the National Telemedia Council Jessie McCause Award for Individual Contribution to Media Literacy.

---

[subject associations] [Australian Teachers of Media (WA)] [curriculum renewal] [theory] [practice] [meeting evolving needs]

A significant absence in the literature on the history, development, content, pedagogy, standards and assessment of media education (the process of teaching/learning about the media) and media studies (a specific school subject) is any discussion of the role, function and effectiveness of related subject associations. It is a gap worthy of note because histories of school subjects usually include reference to the role of the subject association in variously preserving, protecting, defending and changing the discipline whose members it represents. In some cases the subject association has been at the forefront of curriculum reform. Helsby and McCulloch describe the teacher-led reform of the science curriculum in England during the 1960s when the *Science Masters Association* and the *Association of Women Science Teachers* (later to be combined as the *Association for Science Education*) led a campaign for curriculum change that resulted in the *Nuffield Science Teaching Project*, the first large-scale attempt to reform both teaching approaches and content in schools mathematics and science.

To date there has been little investigation into the historical role of media education/media literacy subject associations even though subject associations

have existed for a long time. Some media subject associations have a history almost as old as the concept of media literacy itself. The Ontario-based *Association for Media Literacy* was established in 1978 and expanded over the following decades into British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia. It held conferences in Guelph, Ontario in 1990 and 1992, then *Summit 2000* in Toronto that brought together media educators from Spain, India, the United States, the Philippines, New Zealand and Australia.

Down under professional media teacher associations dated back to the 1970s in some States, notably the *Australian Teachers of Media* (Victoria) and in South Australia. Most other States followed rapidly including the *Australian Teachers of Media* (WA) in 1981. In 1983 there were subject associations established in Scotland—*Association for Media Education Scotland*; and New Zealand—the *Association of Film and Television Teachers* (later NAME or the *National Association of Media Educators*). [The authors apologise to any European, U.S., South American or Asian teacher subject associations that should have been included in the list above. Such absences reflect our lack of knowledge of the early development of subject associations around media literacy in these countries].

If you have arrived at, or are approaching your senior years, you will recognise the names of many of the agents that led the establishment of these teacher associations. The list is a roll call of some of the pioneers of media literacy: Canada—Barry Duncan, John Pungente; Australia—Barrie McMahon; Scotland—Eddie Dick; New Zealand—Geoff Lealand. The structural basis of the various subject associations differ: some—like the Australian organizations—are incorporated bodies, some are companies limited by guarantee and others—like *AMES* in Scotland—are registered charities. However, their commonalities are more numerous than their differences.

All the media education subject associations in their early iterations avowed similar intentions:

- to promote the study of the media in schools
- to provide networking opportunities and professional development for teacher members
- to represent and defend the discipline and their members to the educational authorities, the community and the media.
- to publish material about the media and the teaching of media studies.

In a modest attempt to examine the role and function of media subject associations over time we present a genealogy of one subject association: the *Australian Teachers of Media* (WA). The choice of this particular association is dictated by circumstance—we lack the local knowledge and the resources to investigate the role of subject associations elsewhere. This focus on a single body is not a claim that the Western Australian experience is a universal one; it is certainly not so. However it is to be hoped that the questions we ask, the genealogy we construct with all its contradictions and false starts will prompt others to tell the stories of their own media education associations before all who can contribute to the story of their early histories have departed.

This work asks these questions:

- How did a particular subject association come to look and sound the way it does today?
- What did the subject association do over

time to preserve, protect, or progress its discipline?

- In what ways did or could the subject association exert agency?
- How did it act—or fail to act—as an agent of change?
- How did it perform or otherwise as a tool of leadership and innovation?
- How did it achieve—or fail to achieve—power and influence?

First, the study enquires into the thinking, the processes and principles that led to the birth of the subject. There follows a brief historical examination of the conduct of the Association over a thirty-year period in which we chart the forces determining the nature of the Association and its activities. The study concludes with a discussion of the implications of the genealogy for the future of the professional Association. The work is offered in the hope of making a strategic contribution to the growing body of knowledge about media education around the world.

## Birth

There were two key drivers behind the plan to establish a media studies association for teachers. The Education Department of Western Australia's policy position was that media education would be part of the school curriculum from kindergarten to year 12. However the Department had largely withdrawn its enabling resources. Primary school teachers in particular were left to find their own means of furthering their skills and understandings about media education.

The more significant driver was at upper secondary level. Classroom teachers were engaged in a struggle to have the subject recognised as sufficiently rigorous to be included in those subjects examined for the purposes of university entry (universally seen to be high status subjects). In 1976 the subject Media Studies had been approved by the accrediting authority as being appropriate for students who had no university aspirations. Media Studies teachers however contested this pigeon-holing. It was a struggle which was to last for over thirty years. Meanwhile, in the eyes of the teachers, their current Media Studies student cohort required a non-academic approach, lots of practical activities.

The assumption was that students would automatically learn media concepts by doing media-based activities.

Unlike media education in the United Kingdom and the United States, the subject did not develop as a reaction to community fears about the media as a force alien to culture (Masterman, (1983, 1991); Alvarado, Gutch and Wollen (1987); Buckingham (1998); Tyner (1998). Rather the subject emerged as an answer to a social/educational problem facing Western Australian schools at the time: how to keep less-academically-able students engaged in school. A consequence of the 'hands-on' pedagogy was that Media Studies was seen to be less academically rigorous and a lot more fun than the high status subjects like English or history or the sciences.

Media studies roots as a space for the less-academically-able helped shape and significantly contributed towards an anti-academic discourse around the subject in which doing was prioritised over thinking, production over writing, the popular over the serious. The *Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM)WA* was created in 1981 at a time when the Education Department was withdrawing funds for in-servicing. Its membership was unusual—almost unique—amongst professional teacher associations in Australia in that it comprised both primary and secondary teachers. For

many members, both primary and secondary, skills acquisition was their priority and the subject association was the means to learn production skills. Perhaps more importantly for upper secondary school teachers, a professional teachers' association offered a means by which they thought they could both influence the curriculum and lobby

the educational authorities for higher status for the subject.

*The Australian Teachers of Media (WA) Association's* avowed aim was to promote and expand the teaching of media studies but professional teachers' associations also function as mediators of social and political forces acting upon the school subject: "The subject associations of the teaching profession may be theoretically represented as segments and social movements involved in the negotiation of new alliances and rationales..." (Esland and Dale, 1973, p. 107). In the case of media studies, the subject association was a force for the maintenance of old alliances and rationales.

Although ATOM provided a range of services to members including film previews, cinema discounts, newsletters, occasional lectures, a biennial conference and lobbying, teaching of production skills continued to be a major feature of its activities for the first half of the eighties. Much of its energy was spent in its formative years on conducting skills-based workshops for teachers modelled on the in-services of the seventies. The extract below from the newsletter circulated to media teachers points to the extent to which the Association aimed to reproduce the fun days of the extended, production-oriented, live-in workshops of the seventies:

*ATOM (WA) has been busy organising and running Media Workshops. The one-day workshops in slides and colour printing were well received and the demand for colour printing was so great we are running a repeat workshop late in second term. During the first weekend in May we held a residential workshop at York for teachers interested in starting some Media Studies. Those of you who have ever attended a Media Studies workshop would have recognised the atmosphere instantly. The eyes drooped, the bodies sagged and the jokes got worse but nevertheless all said they loved it. (Little Aidem, 1982, No.2)*

In response to demand from its members ATOM (WA) maintained and reinforced the practical nature of the subject. The expansion in the number of high schools offering media studies across all years in the



1980s was an added incentive for the professional association to provide professional development. At that time there was no supply of trained graduates from the universities, and practical workshops were still a means by which teachers of English, social sciences and arts were trained as media teachers. Teachers in that period could choose to join the discourse of practical work by becoming media teachers or reject the discourse and remain in their existing subject area. Thus those teachers who were “converted” sustained and reinforced the production-oriented discourse.

By the mid-eighties Media Studies—the secondary school subject—was staffed by graduates with a degree in communications. These teachers had little or no need for instruction in how to use media tools and had some background in communication theory and cultural studies. *ATOM* reacted to its new member cohort by shifting its focus from production to theory and actively supported some of its members’ attempts to academicise the subject. Ivor Goodson (1997) argues that the evolution of a school subject from a utilitarian to an academic version is a common route and driven by the self-investment of those teaching the subject. He argues that teachers will seek academic status for their subject out of material self-interest (p. 106). The case of *ATOM* contradicts this argument because *ATOM* embraced simultaneity rather than linear evolution: a new academic discourse joined but did not defeat the existing ant-theoretical conception of the subject.

Certainly there were many secondary school teachers within *ATOM* (WA) whose priority was the subject status of *Media Studies* in years 11 and 12—i.e., recognition as a pathway to university education. Other association members believed that in making the subject more academically rigorous media studies would lose its traditional student base while at the same time failing to capture the hearts and minds of university-bound students. *ATOM* in this period of the mid-eighties accommodated—and at various times supported—both discourses: the academic and the practical.

Notwithstanding the *Association’s* tolerance of some members’ desire to maintain production as the core of the subject, it actively promoted an academic discourse. Evidence for this lies in the first state media conference organised by *ATOM*. The keynote speakers

were all media theorists rather than practitioners—a feminist film academic, a political economist and a researcher with an interest in audience studies. Workshop topics included analysis of television drama and documentary, film genre, representation and feminist film theory. Notably absent from the State *ATOM* conference were the types of workshops that had dominated the *National Media Education Conference* two years previously: sessions on how to apply film make-up, how to stage a movie fight and how to make a class film.

At the same time as *ATOM* was fostering a more academic approach to media studies it was an agent of opposition. Pointed resistance to the intellectualisation of the subject is evident in the subject association newsletter of the period. A correspondent to the publication deplored the “alarming tendency” of media studies to embrace such concepts as myth and metonymy (J. McMahon, 1986, p.3). The newsletter regularly satirised the complexity of the theoretical concepts of the media studies syllabus and the obscurity of its jargon. The publication, in late 1986, of an “Alternative Media Studies Examination,” reproduced in part below, demonstrates this point.

- “An understanding of the ideological function of signs is a necessary pre-requisite for any analysis of the products of the capitalist media.” Discuss with reference to the fact that Joan Collins is a Pisces.
- Write an essay on either the adaptation of the narrative techniques of the classic realist novel to the films of Eisenstein or how Jane Fonda manages to look so young.
- Which is more difficult: trying to understand French semioticians or deciding whether to watch *Sons and Daughters* or *Sale of the Century*?
- Account for the lack of reference to contemporary alienation in *Playschool*. (End of Year Examination: Alternative media studies examination 1987, *ATOM News*, November, 1986, p. 18)

The excerpt above shows how the teachers’ professional association hijacked the academic discourse of cultural studies for its own purposes of critique. It demonstrates how “discourse can be both an instru-

ment and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.” (Foucault, 1981, p. 101) Undoubtedly, Foucault would have regarded the satire above as effective resistance. He argued that resistance is more effective when directed at a “technique” of power rather than at “power” in general (McHoul and Grace, 1993, p. 86). Complexity and jargon were two of the techniques employed by those seeking to make the subject more academically rigorous and introduce new knowledge into media studies. In the satirical “alternative examination” above the subject association is actively interrogating the tactics of power used in the struggle over knowledge. Agency as enacted by the subject association resulted in both change and development (a more academic approach to the subject) and resistance and dissent (a disavowal of the academic approach). *ATOM* demonstrates that agency is complicated, perverse, sometimes illogical and certainly non-monolithic.

## Death

Perhaps the subject association’s failure to achieve a unified, hegemonic vision for its discipline was responsible for its sharp decline over the 1990s. *ATOM*’s *raison d’être* of the seventies—the practical workshops—was irrelevant and unnecessary for the university trained graduates entering the teaching profession. This new breed of teachers had a thorough grounding in media theory, were competent media producers and were arguably better qualified academically than those who led the subject association. They were not interested in learning from those who knew less than themselves. To lead is to anticipate and the leadership of the association manifestly failed to identify the evolving needs of its members.

Perhaps too, the target group of teachers was too broad. Whereas other professional associations had focussed on upper secondary school teachers, *ATOM* (WA) had attempted to service the needs of both primary and secondary school teachers. While the focus was on skills acquisition the services provided by the Association seemed relevant to primary school teachers but their interest and involvement waned once the academic discourse gained temporary dominance.

*ATOM*—in a doomed but desperate effort to

maintain membership and thus viability—got into bed with the media. It broadened its membership base to include many teachers and non-teachers disinterested in media education but seduced by the free cinema tickets offered to members. It became a partner with mainstream media organisations in the production of materials that were in essence advertising materials for the media outlets. By the year 2000 *ATOM* (WA) was effectively dead—it had no formal organisational structure, no executive leadership and no members.

## Resurrection

*ATOM* rose from the dead in 2010 to become a professional learning community focussed on building capacity, providing positive learning opportunities, organizational culture and structure and support for its members. What motivated media teachers to create a new and invigorated teachers’ association? To them it was new, most of them were still in primary school at the time of the death of the original *ATOM* (WA). The biographical notes of the elected office bearers distributed at the initial meeting to establish the new *ATOM* (WA) reveal that the average length of the teaching career of the group was five years.

The drivers behind the re-establishment of *ATOM* were primarily political. In the first decade of the 21st century there was, for the first time in Australia, the very strong likelihood that all the States would have to implement a national curriculum for the years Kindergarten to year 10 (fifteen-year-olds). Fear is a powerful mobilizing agent and media teachers were afraid that their subject area would disappear within a unified national Arts Learning Area. Unlike the English, sciences, mathematics, art and even dance subjects—all of which were represented by well-established teacher associations—media studies had no voice because it had no organized structure to represent its subject teachers. A handful of secondary school media teachers mobilized their cohort and founded the new *ATOM* (WA) with the stated aim of representing the interests of media teachers to the political decision-makers.

While political imperatives generated the resurrection of *ATOM* (WA), its sustainability and growth post-2010 are explained by its ability to meet the needs of its members. Those most attracted were teachers

of the year 11 and 12 courses. Professional development for teachers is not provided by any central education authority, but the need for continual education remains. The upper school media course, called *Media Production and Analysis*, now has the university admission status that was so long sought. There also exists a 'lite' version of the subject aimed at students not intending to proceed to university studies. For ATOM (WA) members, the focus is firmly on the higher status university entry course. A perusal of the correspondence between members indicates that their interest is in obtaining support regarding the examinations, moderation procedures and the production equipment that will enable their students to effectively produce the practical component of their assessment.

Media teachers know that student success in the final external examinations has become a proxy for ranking the quality of schools and the quality of teachers. Western Australian media produces an annual league table of the schools which have produced the most academically-successful students. There are no subject exceptions hence media teachers are under pressure to produce 'successful' students with success defined as a high score. The subject association ATOM (WA)—by virtue of its production of sample examinations, professional development workshops and sharing of teacher resources—is the critical support for teachers trying to ensure their students perform well.

Related to the above is the technology support service provided by the teacher association. The production of a relatively sophisticated media product is a central requirement of the external media examination. While all media studies teachers now have degrees in communications or similar, their level of familiarity with and knowledge of digital technologies is variable. Some who have majored in journalism in their degree may have little or no knowledge of media production, others who have studied film or television at university will be competent media practitioners, however the pace of change in technologies is such that their knowledge of platforms and software is quickly out-of-date. ATOM (WA) provides an essential service in advising members on hardware and software investments and in conducting training in how to use such.

The potted genealogy of ATOM (WA) to date demonstrates how the subject association has contin-

ually sought to define the subject through its publications and activities. In the eighties it was a potent force in the maintenance of a focus on media production through its provision of media production workshops and its attacks on the jargon of cultural studies. In the nineties it was instrumental in building an equivalence between the subject and entertainment when it shifted its attention away from issues of pedagogy and content while devoting its energies to expanding its membership through the recruitment of teachers who were non-media-studies specialists. The denial of its pedagogical role ensured its demise. In rising to meet the professional needs of teachers ATOM (WA) once again is a force in media education. ✱

## REFERENCES

- Alvarado, M., Gutch, R., & Wollen, T. (1987). *Learning the media: An introduction to media teaching*. London: Macmillan.
- Buckingham, D. (1998). Media education in the UK: Moving beyond protectionism. *Journal of Communication*, 48(1), 33-43.
- Esland, G., & Dale, R. (Eds.). (1973). *School and society* (Course E282, Unit 2). Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1981). *The history of sexuality: Vol 1. An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York: Random House.
- Goodson, I. (1997). *The changing curriculum: Studies in social construction*. New York: Peter Lang
- Helsby, Gill and McCulloch, Gary. (1996 )." Teacher Professionalism and Curriculum Control." Goodson, I. & Hargreaves, A. (Eds) *Teachers' Professional Lives*. London: Falmer Press
- Masterman, L. (1983). Media education in the 1980s. *Journal of Educational Television*, 9(1), 7-12.
- Masterman, L. (1991). An overview of media education in Europe. *Media Development: Journal of the World Association for Christian Communication*, XXVII, 3-9.
- McMahon, J. (1986, May). Letter to the editor. *ATOM News*, p. 3.
- Tyner, K. (1998). *Literacy in a digital age: Teaching and learning in the age of information*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gemma Wright, the current ATOM (WA) President who played the key role in the resurrection of ATOM (WA) was interviewed regarding factors which she believed inspired the resurrection. Gemma also provided documents and timelines.

Lawry Hill from the *Central Institute of Technology* was interviewed regarding his contribution both in re-establishing ATOM (WA)'s organizational structure and in providing a platform of technical support and showcasing student productions upon which ATOM (WA) has built.

# Towards a Rights-Based Vision of Digital Literacy

By Matthew Johnson



**Matthew Johnson** is the Director of Education for *MediaSmarts*, Canada's center for digital and media literacy. He is the author of many of *MediaSmarts'* lessons, parent materials and interactive resources and a lead on *MediaSmarts'* Young Canadians in a Wired World research project. He has contributed blogs and articles to websites and magazines around the world as well as presenting *MediaSmarts'* materials on topics such as copyright, cyberbullying, body image and online hate to Parliamentary committees, academic conferences and governments and organizations around the world, frequently as a keynote speaker. He has served as on expert panels convened by the Canadian Pediatric Society, the Ontario Network of Child and

Adolescent Inpatient Psychiatric Services and others, consulted on provincial curriculum for the Ontario Ministry of Education, and been interviewed by outlets such as The Globe and Mail, BBC News Magazine, The Christian Science Monitor, Radio Canada International and CBC's The National.

---

[definitions] [digital literacy] [research] [pedagogy] [critical thinking]

Canadian media education, which has traditionally taken an empowerment approach based on encouraging critical thinking and on empowering young people to become active, engaged consumers and creators of media, has always been about agency. One of the foundational curricular definitions of the term, for instance, places a heavy stress on critical thought and independence:

*Media literacy is concerned with helping students develop an informed and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, the techniques used by them and the impact of these techniques. More specifically, it is education that aims to increase students' understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality. Media literacy also aims to provide students with the ability to create media products.<sup>1</sup>*

The role of agency in digital literacy, on the other hand, is often less clear. To be sure, the distinction between media and digital literacy is somewhat arbitrary and, indeed, digital literacy may be considered as a sub-type of media literacy, especially since more and more of our media consumption is delivered by networked devices.<sup>2</sup> Still, there are aspects of networked

communication, such as digital “drama” or privacy concerns which, while always present with traditional media—telephone conversations, just like social networks, lacked many of the cues we rely on to sense how others are feeling, and certainly were never fully private—are nevertheless far more prominent in a digital context. This suggests that digital literacy is worth considering separately from media literacy, while respecting the many ways in which they overlap.<sup>3</sup>

More often than not, though, “digital literacy” is not connected to media literacy at all, and instead is typically used to mean one of two quite distinct things: the ability to use digital tools specifically to access and evaluate online content—what is sometimes called *information literacy*<sup>4</sup>—and a suite of skills and habits designed to prevent youth from either encountering or causing trouble online, which is frequently also called *digital citizenship*.<sup>5</sup> There are *aspects* of agency to both of these definitions: certainly, youth need to know some technical skills to have full agency in the networked world, as much as they need to be able to navigate the risks of being online. The ability of both visions of digital literacy to provide youth with agency, though, are limited by their definitions. Information literacy focuses too narrowly on a particular use of digital media, and even in that use ignores the considerations of being both a consumer and a broadcaster (or re-broadcaster) of information in a networked



world: most of the information that youth encounter online comes to them via social media, adding an ethical dimension to *sharing* information that is typically absent from information literacy models. Digital citizenship has a broader focus and an emphasis on ethics, but is most often more a list of things *not* to do in order to keep yourself and others safe. As important as these rules may be, the emphasis on them—and the resulting narrowing of students’ options and experiences—means that more often than not digital citizenship programs create a *barrier* to agency, as youth come to see themselves exclusively as either victims to be protected or delinquents whose natural tendencies must be curbed.<sup>6</sup> We saw this view reflected in our survey of Canadian teachers, who identified “staying safe online,” “appropriate online behaviour” and “dealing with cyberbullying” as the top three most important digital literacy topics for students to learn.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, most efforts by governments at all levels to address these issues are framed in negative, punitive contexts and rely heavily on scare tactics.<sup>8</sup> To encourage youth to be responsible, creative and critically engaged users of networked technology, we need to stop trying to scare them into following rules and instead teach them to know and exercise their rights as informed and engaged digital *citizens*.

To do so, we must ensure young people know that despite the Internet’s borderless qualities, they do not give up their rights when they go online: both the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (referred to hereafter as the *Convention*) and the specific rights guaranteed by their own governments, such as the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, provide youth with essential rights in their dealings with government, service providers, third parties and other Internet users. These include rights to privacy, to free expression, to education and access to information, and to be free from discrimination, fear, violence and harassment.

At *MediaSmarts* we have developed a definition of digital literacy, based on models from the *Report of the Digital Britain Media Literacy Working Group*, *DigEuLit*, and *Project New Media Literacies*,<sup>9</sup> that is made up of four key components: first, *access* to networks and networked devices, a precondition for digital literacy; then what we’ve identified as the three key digital literacy skills—the competence in using digital tools,

from search engines to social networks; the ability to *understand* the content that they access, not just on a surface level but in a critically engaged way that draws on media literacy to recognize how both the commercial nature of the spaces they inhabit and the technical architecture of the networked world influence that content; and, finally, the ability to *create* content using those digital tools, both for creative expression and for advocacy purposes as consumers and citizens.<sup>10</sup>

While not technically a part of the definition, *access* can be seen as a necessary precondition of digital literacy, since youth cannot acquire any of the other skills without reliable access to networks. It is also a right: Article 17 of the *Convention* requires parties to “ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.”<sup>11</sup> Our research has found that the great strides taken by Canadian governments in the early days of the Internet<sup>12</sup> have not necessarily been followed up on. While nearly all of the youth in our student survey told us that they are able to access the Internet outside of school,<sup>13</sup> our qualitative data suggests that that access may not be fast or reliable in many rural and northern parts of the country. The picture inside schools, meanwhile, is concerning. In

*More often than not digital citizenship programs create a barrier to agency, as youth come to see themselves exclusively as either victims to be protected or delinquents whose natural tendencies must be curbed.*

our survey of K-12 teachers we heard again and again frustration with slow and unreliable networks and out-of-date or poorly chosen technology.<sup>14</sup> It goes without saying that schools are where youth have the best chance of learning the digital literacy skills they need, not just those *they* think they need, and we would be right to be concerned about a situation where teenagers are significantly more digitally connected at times when they are away from guidance and supervision.

There is more to access than literally being able to connect to networks: youth also need to be able to use them without fear of harassment, bullying and hate. This, too, is a right, as the *Convention* requires

signatory states to “protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation.” Unfortunately, our research has shown that Canadian girls, in particular, are likely to see the Internet as a frightening place, which may lead to narrowed opportunities and, as an ironic result,

lower levels of confidence, resiliency and safety skills. Events of the last few years have shown clearly that many online spaces are hostile environments for women and girls, as well as for visible minorities and other marginalized groups: over a

third of Canadian students in grades 7 to 11 encounter sexist or racist content online at least once a week.<sup>15</sup> To confront the forms of harassment and hostility that keep youth from taking full advantage of their online access, youth need to be made aware of their rights in online spaces and empowered to build communities where their rights are respected.

Much of the harassment that youth face online is actually perpetrated by peers, underscoring the need to teach students how to *use* digital tools responsibly and effectively. While this skill includes the obvious technical proficiencies associated with using networked technology, it also encompasses the *ethical* and *affective* dimensions of that use, such as understanding the real effects of what we do in virtual worlds, and addressing the effects of digital communication on empathy and relationships. As well, it means understanding the full *consequences* of our use of digital technology, such as the risks posed to our privacy. Unfortunately, our research found that Canadian youth are often unaware of their rights to privacy, whether those provided by the terms of service they agree to (two-thirds of Canadian students don’t understand the purpose of privacy policies),<sup>16</sup> those provided by laws such as COPPA or PIPEDA, or the *Convention*, which states that “no child shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his or her privacy.” While most of the major social networks have made significant strides in recent years in providing users, particularly youth, with more tools to manage their privacy and remove unwanted contact, our research showed that young Canadians either have little knowledge of or little confidence in these tools: just over one in six of the students surveyed said they

would contact the service provider in order to have an unwanted photo removed.<sup>17</sup>

In order for youth to exercise their rights as consumers, though, they need to understand the commercial considerations of the media they use—particularly those that use their data and personal information as a source of revenue. To do that, we need to do a better job of teaching them to *understand* digital media. The “understand” skills can be seen as a bright point in the Canadian digital literacy landscape: students and teachers agree on the value of being able to verify the information they see online, and most students know and use a number of different techniques for doing this.<sup>18</sup> But here, too, there is a gap between school and the rest of students’ lives, with authentication seen as primarily a matter for the classroom: while nine in ten students verify information they need for school work, only two-thirds do so for information they’re seeking for their personal interest, and just over half verify anything they learn through social media<sup>19</sup>—the main source of news for youth and an increasing number of adults as well.<sup>20</sup> Increasingly, the Internet is where politics happens, and authentication skills—especially the “soft” skills of recognizing bias, loaded language, and how a source may be compromised by who is funding it—are essential for (as Article 29 of the *Convention* puts it) “the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society.”

For the same reasons, to be involved in civic life today means contributing to the “online commons” by creating digital media. Despite the fact that the Internet has removed the stranglehold that publishers and broadcasters once held on getting the message out, however—and the fact we can now do with a cellphone what twenty years ago required a camcorder that cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars—relatively few Canadian youth are creating content, in<sup>20</sup> or out<sup>21</sup> of school. Not being taught to *create* digital media—not only limits students’ education, but also their right “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.” (Article 13).

A consequence of providing youths with the means and the right to express themselves, of course, is the likelihood that some of that expression will take the form of prejudice, hostility and harassment. This, though, shows the value of taking a rights-based ap-



proach: so many issues online are about finding an appropriate *balance* of rights, such as the right to free expression and the right to be free of harassment—a balance that models based on either technical skill or on safety and good behaviour cannot help us find.

The *Convention* is only one lens through which we can look at young people's rights, of course. Many nations have their own guarantees of human and civil rights: the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, for example, guarantees similar rights, such as security of the person, freedom from discrimination, and freedom of expression.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the particular context, framing digital literacy in this way respects young people's agency by giving them the right *and* the responsibility to participate in finding that balance as full-fledged digital citizens. To do this, though, we need to again draw on media literacy, which, with its emphasis on empowerment and critical thinking, is ultimately about helping youth understand their rights—their right to be well-informed, their right to be heard, and their right to their own opinions and conclusions—not by leading them to a “right” answer but giving them the tools to critically engage with the media they consume.

In the final analysis, all forms of literacy can be viewed in terms of rights because they enable us both to fully understand and engage with content and because they provide a means of expressing ourselves in the same way. Indeed, it was the archetypal literacy, reading and writing print, that made possible the idea of rights, by overturning “the legal commonplace... that a live witness deserved more credence than words on parchment”<sup>24</sup> and giving citizens access to a rule of law that could counter the weight of tradition and overrule the whims of kings. Just as print literacy was for so long taught as a suite of purely mechanical skills, though (and too often still is), so too must digital literacy broaden its focus to include helping youth understand and know how to exercise their rights, and at the same time accept that doing so means letting them draw their own conclusions about right and wrong. ❖

## FOOTNOTES

1 *Media Literacy Resource Guide*. (1989). Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Education.

2 Poyntz, S. and Hoehmann, M. (2011) *Teaching and Learning Media: From Media Literacy 1.0 to Media Literacy 2.0*. Wiley-Blackwell Publishers.

3 The Intersection of Digital and Media Literacy. (n.d.). Retrieved August 12, 2016, from <http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/general-information/digital-media-literacy-fundamentals/intersection-digital-media-literacy>

4 Stordy, P. (2015). Taxonomy of Literacies. *Journal of Documentation*, 71 (3). pp. 456-476. ISSN 1758-7379.

5 Ribble, M. (n.d.). Nine Elements. Retrieved August 12, 2016, from [http://www.digitalcitizenship.net/Nine\\_Elements.html](http://www.digitalcitizenship.net/Nine_Elements.html)

6 Ofsted, *The Safe Use of New Technologies* (Ofsted, 2010), <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/surveys-and-good-practice/t/The%20safe%20use%20of%20new%20technologies.pdf> (accessed November 11, 2014).

7 Johnson, M., Riel, R. and Froese-Germain, B. *Connected to Learn: Teachers' Experiences with Networked Technologies in the Classroom*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts/Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2016.

8 Jones, L. M., Mitchell, K. J., & Walsh, W. A. (2012). *Evaluation of Internet Child Safety Materials Used by ICAC Task Forces in School and Community Settings*, Final Report (Rep.). Durham, NH: Crimes Against Children Research Center, 201 2. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/242016.pdf>.

9 Ofcom (2009). Report of the Digital Britain Media Literacy Working Group: 27 March 2009. Ofcom; Martin, 2005. DigEuLit — a European framework for digital literacy: a progress report. *Journal of ELiteracy*. v2. 130-136; Jenkins et al., (2006) *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. <http://www.newmedialiteracies.org/files/working/NMLWhitePaper.pdf>

10 Digital Literacy Fundamentals (MediaSmarts). <http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy-fundamentals/digital-literacy-fundamentals>

11 The United Nations. “Convention on the Rights of the Child.” Treaty Series 1577 (1989): <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

12 Darragh, I. “SchoolNet.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, first published December 3 2012, last edited December 16 2013. < <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/schoolnet/>>

13 Steeves, V. *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Life Online*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts, 2014.

14 Johnson et al.

15 Steeves, V. *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Encountering Racist and Sexist Content Online* Ottawa: MediaSmarts, 2014.

16 Steeves, V. *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Online Privacy, Online Publicity*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts, 2014.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Steeves, V. *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Experts or Amateurs*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts, 2014.

20 Ibid.

21 Pew Research Center, June, 2016, “State of the News Media 2016”

22 Johnson et al.

23 Steeves, V. *Young Canadians in a Wired World, Phase III: Experts or Amateurs*. Ottawa: MediaSmarts 2014.

24 Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Part I of the Constitution Act, 1982, being Schedule B to the Canada Act 1982 (UK), 1982, c 11.

25 Burke, J. (1995). *The day the universe changed*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.

# Marshall McLuhan on Agency in Education and Technology Use

By Alexander Kuskis, Ph.D.



**Alex Kuskis**, Ph. D. (Toronto) has divided his career between higher education and the media businesses of book publishing and computers. He has taught at several universities in Canada and the USA and presently teaches online Communication courses for Gonzaga University from his home in Canada. He is working on a book on Marshall McLuhan as Educationist and publishes the McLuhan Galaxy blog at <https://mcluhangalaxy.wordpress.com/>.

---

[McLuhan] [media literacy] [effects] [pedagogy] [active learning]

**T**hroughout his career in university teaching, research, writing and public intellectual activity, Marshall McLuhan advocated agency in user interactions with technology, especially communication media, and on another level, in student learning in formal education. He did so indirectly, not often using the word *agency* per se, through his teaching, lecturing and writing advocacy and occasional consulting about the social effects of the burgeoning electronic media environment of his time. An English literature professor by education and profession, he was fascinated by the pop culture of the 1960s—television, advertising, movies and rock-and-roll music—and pop culture became equally fascinated with him.

## The Subliminal Environments Created by New Media

During the 1950s and '60s he became increasingly aware and concerned about the cognitive and social effects of the media transition from a print-based culture to an electronic-based culture, one which displaced text with images and discourse as the dominant symbolic forms for communication. He had encountered such a cultural shift before in his study of the transformation of culture by the Gutenberg printing press, which gradually overrode a rich oral-based communal culture with a print-based individualistic one:

*“If we persist in a conventional approach to these developments our traditional culture will be swept aside as scholasticism was in the sixteenth century. Had the Schoolmen with their complex oral culture understood the Gutenberg technology, they could have created a new synthesis of written and oral education, instead of bowing out of the picture and allowing the merely visual page to take over the educational enterprise. The oral Schoolmen did not meet the new visual challenge of print, and the resulting expansion or explosion of Gutenberg technology was in many respects an impoverishment of the culture...”* (McLuhan, 1964, 71)

Concerned about a new cultural displacement of reading, writing and print by the new electric and electronic media of his time, which he called the “*new media*” (McLuhan, 1959, 1), he probed those new media environments to perceive their effects on the human sensorium and cognition, as well as the social sphere, borrowing figure-ground analysis from Gestalt psychology for his analyses.

The figure-ground problem deals with the perceptual deficiency caused by our inability to perceive the totality of a scene equally; instead of taking in the whole, we visually tend to focus on a central or domi-

nant figure, or sometimes one that is in motion, which arrests the eye, while the background, which is the ground of the figure, recedes and escapes our notice. This tendency can be corrected, or at least compensated for, through training and practice, providing the viewer with a sense of configuration, which McLuhan claimed that “an artist brings to bear on painting, a satirist on situations” (McLuhan, Hutchon & McLuhan, 1977, 10). It is this perceptual incapacity that renders us blind to the environments created by new media, McLuhan noting that, “It is one thing to spot a new product but quite another to observe the invisible new environments generated by the action of the product on a variety of pre-existing social grounds.” (McLuhan & Nevitt, 1972, 63) He used the metaphor of people being as oblivious of their ubiquitous electronic media environments as fish are of their environmental water surround: “Media effects are new environments as imperceptible as water to a fish, subliminal for the most part.” (McLuhan, 1969, 22)

### Marshall McLuhan’s Pedagogical Project

It became McLuhan’s ambitious pedagogical project (Marchessault, 2005, 47) to raise the public consciousness to the harmful effects of electric and electronic media, hidden by their subliminal environments, wanting to train public awareness to those disservices of media that he perceived with his probing observations, integral awareness and pattern recognition capabilities. In the quotation below from the 1969 *Playboy Interview* of McLuhan, which is worth quoting at length, he explains that understanding media is the first step in gaining control over it:

*“The first and most vital step of all ... is simply to understand media and its revolutionary effects on all psychic and social values and institutions. Understanding is half the battle. The central purpose of all my work is to convey this message, that by understanding media as they extend man, we gain a measure of control over them. And this is a vital task, because the immediate interface between audile-tactile and visual perception is taking place everywhere around us. No civilian can escape this environmental blitz-*

*krieg, for there is, quite literally, no place to hide. But if we diagnose what is happening to us, we can reduce the ferocity of the winds of change and bring the best elements of the old visual culture, during this transitional period, into peaceful coexistence with the new retribalized society.”* (McLuhan, 1969b)

Understanding is critical for people to avoid becoming what McLuhan called “servomechanisms” to the technologies originally created to serve them. McLuhan used a startling metaphor to illustrate how humans are used by their technological creations: “Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine

*In general, McLuhan advocated active learning pedagogies, which can be defined as instructional methods that engage students in the learning process through meaningful activities and reflection* (Prince, 2004).

*world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms.”* (McLuhan, 1964, 46) Although this seems to confirm the technological determinism that he was often accused of, he insisted that technology could only have its way with us if we lack awareness of its effects and how to counter them: “Nothing is inevitable provided we are prepared to pay attention.” (McLuhan, 1967, 25)

We need to remember that the electronic media of McLuhan’s time were not of the interactive kind of digital media we have today; one-way mass media was the norm and the only level of agency that the mass audience was capable of was that of understanding, as responses to radio, TV and movie programming were limited. Teaching media understanding was the major aim of McLuhan’s for society at large, which is why he titled his most important book *Understanding Media*, while Terrence Gordon subtitled his official biography of McLuhan, *Escape into Understanding* (1997).

### Agency in Student Learning

The editors of this special issue on agency provided a range of definitions of agency, from the broadly gen-

eral (“agency is knowledge in action”), to the highly specific context of media literacy education (“agency is exercising media literacy and education to support learning, which might mean using media and media literacy to learn more effectively or more deeply, about either media or other knowledge areas”). McLuhan’s ideas relating to agency in learning of course are not specific to the context of media literacy education per se, for the simple reason that such education did not yet exist in McLuhan’s time. His ideas about agency in education are related to institutional learning in general, to every subject in the curriculum, not just the subject of media literacy. But his ideas on education, and specifically the kind of pedagogy that he deemed to be desirable for the post-literate electronic era, are foundational for media literacy education today. In general, McLuhan advocated active learning pedagogies, which can be defined as instructional methods that engage students in the learning process through meaningful activities and reflection (Prince, 2004).

### **“Cool” Pedagogy and the Elimination of Lectures**

The idea of “cool” pedagogy derives from McLuhan’s distinction between a hot medium and a cool one, which he explained thus: “... a hot medium excludes and a cool medium includes; *hot media are low in participation, or completion, by the audience and cool media are high in participation.*” (McLuhan, 1969) Applied to pedagogy, it is not a term that McLuhan himself used, except to describe lectures as a hot medium, and has been appropriated by the author of this article because, like cool media, cool pedagogy invites participation, interaction and involvement. He was follow-

ing John Dewey in this, whom he cites in his writings, believing that inactivity undermines learning. In one of his letters, McLuhan quoted Francis Bacon on the desirability of teaching “broken knowledge,” by which he meant incomplete aspects of any subject, because: “... *aphorisms, representing a knowledge broken, do invite men to inquire farther; whereas Methods, carrying the show of a total*” do not. (Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toyne, 1987, 444) Whether using aphorisms or other means, teachers should resist presenting the totality of any subject, but rather just enough to generate curiosity in students sufficient to make them want to seek out the rest of the information using their own agency.

The pedagogy that has the most student inactivity is the lecture, which is a hot medium that requires passivity, rapt attention, usually note-taking and discipline to learn from. But, retention is poor and a recent study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* concluded that students in classes with traditional stand-and-deliver lectures were 1.5 times more likely to fail than students in classes using more stimulating active learning methods. (Bajak, 2014) McLuhan and his collaborator George Leonard wrote in a LOOK Magazine article (1967) that:

*“Lectures, the most common mode of instruction in mass education, called for very little student involvement. This mode, one of the least effective ever devised by man, served well enough in an age that demanded only a specified fragment of each human being’s whole abilities. There was, however, no warranty on the human products of mass education.”* (McLuhan & Leonard, 1967)

In his short book titled *Counterblast* two years later, McLuhan concluded that: “*The lecture is finished in the classroom.*” (1969, p. 72) But that conclusion was premature, as only during the last decade or so has the opposition to lecturing become more insistent and although active learning alternatives like the “flipped classroom” have been advocated and used as alternatives, lecturing in institutional education is still all too prevalent.

### **Discovery Learning and the Probe as Pedagogy**

Active learning methods that were advocated by Marshall McLuhan include discovery learning, using a unique research method that he devised for himself called probing, as he wrote in 1966:

*Teachers should resist presenting the totality of any subject, but rather just enough to generate curiosity in students sufficient to make them want to seek out the rest of the information using their own agency.*

ing John Dewey in this, whom he cites in his writings, believing that inactivity undermines learning. In one of his letters, McLuhan quoted Francis Bacon on the desirability of teaching “broken knowledge,” by which

*“Education on all levels has to move from packaging to probing, from the mere conveying of data to the experimental discovering of new dimensions of experience. The search will have to be for patterns of experience and discovery of principles of organization which have universal application, not for facts. ... It is the orientation of the society that matters, and our whole world, in shifting from the old mechanical forms to the new electronic feedback forms, has already shifted from data packaging to probing of patterns.”* (McLuhan, 1966, 38)

*The Book of Probes* defines the probe as: “... a means or method of perceiving. It comes from the world of conversation & dialogue... Like conversation, the verbal probe is discontinuous, nonlinear; it tackles things from many angles at once.” (McLuhan & Carson, 2003, 403) Despite his considerable output in written form, McLuhan revelled in interactive dialogue with his collaborators and students, engaging in what came to be called brainstorming at a later time.

Discovery learning is an approach originated by Jerome Bruner in the 1960s, but previously advocated by John Dewey, which he defined as “all forms of obtaining knowledge for oneself by the use of one’s own mind.” (1961, 22) He saw this as a matter of “rearranging or transforming evidence in such a way that one is enabled to go beyond the evidence so assembled to additional new insights.” (1961, 22) Students engage in problem-solving assignments where they utilize their own past experiences and existing knowledge to discover information and relationships that lead to new knowledge to be learned. Both discovery learning and research probes represent active learning methods in a student-centered manner that give agency to learners, enabling them to develop initiative and research skills. It was essentially McLuhan’s own method of research, which he advocated for institutional learning at all levels.

### **The City as Classroom and Classroom without Walls**

Always aware that the ground or environment of any entity or activity has a transformative effect on the figure or figures within its midst, McLuhan wanted to

move education out of classrooms into the surrounding community and landscape. His reasoning was simply that in the Electronic Age, the world outside the classroom was much more information-rich than any classroom could be:

*“We have to realize that more instruction is going on outside the classroom, many times more every minute of the day than goes on inside the classroom. That is, the amount of information that is embedded in young minds per minute outside the classroom far exceeds anything that happens inside the classroom in just quantitative terms now.”* (McLuhan, 1966, 38)

And elsewhere he suggested that: “Education must always concentrate its resources at the point of major information intake.” (McLuhan, 1969, 119) To him, that was not in classrooms. He called this information-rich environment outside of schools the “classroom without



walls” and named the media that were the sources of its information: “The movie, radio, and TV: classroom without walls.” (McLuhan, 1964, 283) Elsewhere, he added advertisements to this urban media ecology, while indicating his disdain for conventional place-based education: “The metropolis today is a classroom, the ads are its teachers. The traditional classroom is AN OBSOLETE DETENTION HOME, a feudal dungeon.” (McLuhan’s emphasis) (McLuhan & Carson, 2003, 126)

Marshall McLuhan’s final book published during his lifetime, *City as Classroom: Understanding Lan-*

*guage and Media* (1977), co-authored by his son Eric McLuhan and Toronto high school teacher Kathryn Hutchon, demonstrates how the city could be used as an extension of the classroom while still using the latter as a home base. Taking learners from the highly-structured and supervised classroom and into the city could not help but give greater agency to students,

*Taking learners from the highly-structured and supervised classroom and into the city could not help but give greater agency to students, especially if the kinds of probing exercises related to media described by the authors are used.*

especially if the kinds of probing exercises related to media described by the authors are used. Students would be assigned to separate research teams to employ figure/ground analyses in determining the properties and effects of a wide variety of media within the city: cars, newspapers, books, light bulbs, TV, audio tape, clocks, satellites, money, and a lot more; several weeks of outside discovery and analysis would be followed by class discussions.

For example, news stories presented in print, radio and TV that describe the same news, but affect different sensory organs, would be compared for their emotional impacts. Conducting a word count of print news stories compared to that of a 22-minute TV news program would reveal that the word count of the latter would fit onto one page of a newspaper (Mason, 2016, 88). The role of film footage for TV news stories might be considered to determine if the availability of film footage by itself justified the story's inclusion and whether it was included more for its mere entertainment value. Students might be asked to examine how objectivity in news reporting has changed over time by comparing current stories to similar ones in the distant past. In his recent study of *City as Classroom*, Mason (2016, 94) summarizes his detailed analysis with the comment that the book offers students opportunities:

*"...to become active participants in understanding the psychological and social repercussions of technologies that increasingly*

*mediate their experiences...These inquiry activities take students' media experiences from being taken for granted, to being open to reflective examination."*

### **Related Pedagogical Reform Ideas**

It is clear from the descriptions of the collaborative team assignments in *City as Classroom*, where teachers are scarcely mentioned at all as part of the educational process, that teacher roles would have to be redefined in the new media ecology. Today, this teacher redefinition is sometimes described as a shift from a "sage-on-the-stage" role to a "guide-on-the-side" role; teachers must focus on guiding, leading and supporting learners, rather than subjecting them to "chalk-and-talk" lectures and teaching to the test. Teachers would lead students to a discovery learning/team project approach that gives greater agency to learners: "... teacher can go from team to team, giving direct help... as needed, focusing his or her attention on the aptitudes and difficulties of individuals, and performing the teacher's essential function of charting the course of student's explorations." (*City as Classroom Teacher's Guide*, 1977b) Clearly, such a "guide-on-the-side" approach affords much greater agency to learners than the traditional controlling "sage-on-the-stage."

McLuhan also insisted that the practice of grading student assignments, based as it is on competition, is useless and even harmful, although it is unclear what he would have substituted. He wanted the book-centric educational world to adopt other forms of instructional media to reflect the current media ecology: TV, films, records, audiotapes, video, and other media. And he advocated the teaching of media literacy, without using that term, treating individual media as new languages, because, "*Without an understanding of media grammars, we cannot hope to achieve a contemporary awareness of the world in which we live.*" (McLuhan & Carpenter, 1960, ix-xii) Finally, he wanted schools to train the perceptual capabilities of students using Figure/Ground analysis to discover the meanings of things in our world of technological extensions, which is what *City as Classroom* is about. All of these proposals would enhance learner agency and lead to learner-centric educational system.



## Final Thoughts

McLuhan has often been criticized for promoting a vision of technological determinism, the idea that technologies are “*the sole or prime antecedent causes of changes in society, and technology is seen as the fundamental condition underlying the pattern of social organization.*” (Chandler, 2014) Such critics complain that McLuhan denies much, if any, agency to users of the media technologies that he wrote about (Marshall, 2004). But as his earlier quote (“*Nothing is inevitable provided we are prepared to pay attention.*”) suggests, he believed that technology users are—or at least can be—active agents. But the proviso in that statement is a big one—that people are capable of and prepared to pay attention to more than just the content of media messages, their capability being dependent on their abilities to perceive the subliminal environments of their technologies and their effects, especially the harmful ones.

Further support for McLuhan’s belief in human agency is his idea of the user as content of any medium s/he’s contending with: “*The user is always the content of any situation, whether it’s driving a car or wearing clothes or watching a show. The user is the content.*” (McLuhan, 1976, 250) As Robert Logan (2010) parses the latter aphorism, “...each reader or viewer brings his or her own experience and understanding to a medium and transforms the content according to his or her own need and abilities.” (76) He goes on to write that information has no inherent meaning independent of the consumer of it. (77) However, though active users create meaning for themselves, technology is not neutral and has intrinsic biases designed and built into it from initial conception through the design process (VanderLeest, n.d., para. 1). So, there is a technological limitation on a user’s agency. Despite this, McLuhan continued to express the view that understanding was the key to user control of technology and maintained an optimistic view of his/her ability to do so: “*I have deep and abiding belief in man’s potential to grow and learn, to plumb the depths of his own being and to learn the secret songs that orchestrate the universe.*” (McLuhan, 1969b) ❖

## REFERENCES

- Bajak, A. (2014). Lectures aren’t just boring, they’re ineffective, too, study finds. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2014/05/lectures-arent-just-boring-theyre-ineffective-too-study-finds>.
- Bruner, J.S. (1961). The act of discovery. *Harvard Educational Review*, 31, 31-32.
- Chandler, D. (2014). Technological or media determinism. Retrieved from <http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/tecdet/tdet02.html>
- Kuskis, A. (2011). *Marshall McLuhan as educationist: Institutional learning in the post-literate Era*. *Explorations in Media Ecology*, 10 (3&4), 313-333.
- Logan, R.K. (2010). *McLuhan misunderstood: Setting the record straight*. Toronto: Key.
- Marchessault, J. (2005). *Marshall McLuhan: Cosmic media*. London: SAGE.
- Marshall, D.P. (2004). *New media cultures*. London: Arnold.
- Mason, L. (2016). McLuhan’s challenge to critical media literacy. The ‘City as Classroom’ textbook. *Curriculum inquiry*, 46(1), 79 - 97
- McLuhan, M. (1959). Electronic revolution: Revolutionary effects of new media. In S. McLuhan & D. Staines (Eds.), *Understanding me: Lectures & interviews*, (1 - 11). Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- McLuhan, M. (1976). What TV does best - NBC Tomorrow Show Interview by Tom Snyder. In S. McLuhan & D. Staines (Eds.), *Understanding me: Lectures & interviews*, (244 - 255). Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- McLuhan, M. (1966, April). *Electronics & the psychic drop-out. THIS Magazine is about SCHOOLS*, 1(1), 37-42.
- McLuhan, M. (1969). *Counterblast*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- McLuhan, M. (1969b, March). Playboy interview: Marshall McLuhan. *Playboy*, 53 - 74, 158. Available online at <http://www.digitalaltern.net/mcluhan/mcluhanplayboy.htm>.
- McLuhan, M., & Agel, J. (1967). *The Medium is the message: An inventory of effects*. Corte Madera: CA. Gingko Press.
- McLuhan, M. & Carpenter, E. (1960) (Eds.). *Explorations in communication: Anthology*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- McLuhan, M. (1972), & Nevitt, B. (1972). *Take today: The executive as dropout*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- McLuhan, M., & Carson, D. (2003). *The book of probes*. Corte Madera: CA. Gingko Press.
- McLuhan, M., Hutchon, K., & McLuhan, E. (1977). *City as classroom: Understanding language and media*. Agincourt, ON: Book Society of Canada.
- McLuhan, M., Hutchon, K., & McLuhan, E. (1977b). *City as classroom: Teacher’s guide*. Agincourt, ON: Book Society of Canada.
- Molinario, M., McLuhan, C. & Toye, W. (Eds.). (1987). *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work? A review of the research. *Journal of engineering education*. 93(3). 223-231.
- VanderLeest (n.d.). The Built-in Bias of Technology. Retrieved from [http://www.calvin.edu/academic/engineering/aseeled/program/abstracts2004/2004-1670\\_Abstract.pdf](http://www.calvin.edu/academic/engineering/aseeled/program/abstracts2004/2004-1670_Abstract.pdf)

# Maneuvering Entrenched Structures of Arab Education Systems:

## The agency of Arab media literacy educators and activists

By **Jad Melki, Ph.D., and Lubna Maaliki, M.A.**



**Jad Melki**, Ph.D., is associate professor of the journalism and media studies and chairperson of the Department of Communication Arts at the Lebanese American University (LAU), where he also directs the Institute of Media Research and Training. Melki is also a visiting faculty at the Salzburg Academy and an affiliated researcher with ICMPA at the University of Maryland. His research is at the intersection of digital media literacy, journalism, war, and gender studies, and focuses on Arab media education. Previously, Melki was founding director of Media Studies at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and has taught at the University of Maryland, Johns Hopkins, and Towson University. In 2015, he won the UNESCO-UNAOc International Media and Information Literacy Award for advancing media literacy education in the Arab region through founding the Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut (MDLAB).



**Lubna Maaliki**, M.A., is the director of the Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut (MDLAB) and a media literacy researcher and trainer.

The **Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut** (MDLAB) aims to develop, advance, and promote media and digital literacy education in the Arab region through the training of Arab teachers and researchers and the development of locally rooted curricula. [www.mdlab.center](http://www.mdlab.center)

---

[activism] [Arab media education] [Arab spring] [MDLAB] [global media literacy]

**H**ow do you introduce media literacy to a whole region where top-down government structures control educational systems? ...where war, conflict, and terrorism occupies vast areas? ... where decrepit public education systems are dominated by nepotism and archaic curricula? ...where extremist ideologies and fundamentalism increasingly define the political culture? ...and where social and economic injustice, military occupation, political persecution, and authoritarianism are the chronic norms of the past half-century?

Before 2009, media literacy simply did not exist in the Arab region, neither as a university or school program, nor even as a concept discussed by the academics and scholars of the region. With the exception of a handful of individual initiatives at a couple of elite private universities, media and digital literacy were alien terms that guaranteed confusion and dismissal whenever broached in academic conferences.

In 2010, a small group of Arab academics and university students devised to introduce the concept to the Arab academic community. Members of this group had become passionate about media literacy after learning about it during their graduate pursuits in the US and Europe and through study-abroad programs, such as the Salzburg Academy. With the help of the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and the Arab-US Association of Communication Educators (AUSACE), a media literacy-themed conference was convened in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2011. The idea of building generations of critical thinkers and digitally savvy and civically engaged citizens resonated widely with the conference attendees. This was not surprising, given the event's coincidental timing with the debut of the "Arab Spring" and the spirit of hope that it carried during the early stage of the uprisings that swept the region and toppled authoritarian regimes.

But not all was rosy. The conference also brought

to the fore the tedious challenges of promoting and developing media literacy in the region. Meetings with faculty at the conference unveiled the three most daunting obstacles:

1. The lack of qualified faculty able and willing to teach media and digital literacy.
2. The dearth of media literacy curricula in Arabic that address Arab priorities.
3. Entrenched political structures that have subjugated the academic systems to serve as propaganda instruments of the state.

And soon after, the obstacles increased, as the optimism of the first stage of the Arab uprisings turned into desperation and hopelessness. As several peaceful uprisings turned violent and plunged their societies into brutal civil wars, and the few successful movements faced cooption by fundamentalist groups and counter-revolutionary military juntas, the importance of introducing media literacy to the region did not feature high on anyone's priority list, and its future seemed bleak. But plans were already underway and it was too late to turn back.

The *Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut* (MDLAB) launched in summer 2013 with the aim of addressing the aforementioned three obstacles. MDLAB's mission is to advance digital and media literacy education in the region through training Arab media educators and developing curricula—not only in Arabic, but more importantly grounded in Arab cultures and concerns, and helping academics maneuver their countries' higher education bureaucracies and obstacles to introduce media literacy to their societies. The idea was to bring together—every summer for three intensive weeks—50 academics, graduate students, and activists from various Arab countries and train them through lectures, workshops, and TOT sessions on media and digital literacy concepts and competencies. The hope was that these same participants will return to their countries equipped to teach media literacy at their colleges and schools and create a multiplying effect by advocating the merits of media literacy in their societies and training more compatriots to carry the media literacy torch forward.

MDLAB participants come from Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Algeria, Tunis, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Oman,

UAE, Morocco, and Lebanon. While all theoretically are “Arab,” each cohort looks more like a hodge-podge of contradictory cultures and political orientations, heterogeneous linguistic clusters, and a wide range of religious, ideological, ethnic and national identities. They included Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish Iraqis; pro-government and pro-opposition Syrians; Christians and Muslims from throughout the region; Jordanians and Yemenis who mastered the Arabic language but barely understood any foreign language and Lebanese and Algerians who couldn't seem to put an Arabic sentence together without it being riddled with French and English terms; religiously conservative and traditionally dressed men and women who don't shake hands with the opposite gender and secular liberals who spent most of their free time exploring the Beirut pub scene and its hypersexualized beach resorts; digitally illiterate veteran academics whose perception of media education echoes antiquated theories from the 1960s and multitasking junior faculty and graduate students who can't seem to unplug from their mobile devices and social media apps.

The only matter they seemed to have in common was the tedious and often treacherous journeys

*The hope was that these same participants will return to their countries equipped to teach media literacy at their colleges and schools and create a multiplying effect by advocating the merits of media literacy in their societies and training more compatriots to carry the media literacy torch forward.*

they made to reach Beirut. Each academy, participants share their fascinating travel stories: the participants from Palestine who braved the agony of crossing Israeli checkpoints—including a guy who snuck through a Gaza tunnel to make it into Egypt—only to face even more discriminatory treatment by the Lebanese border police; the woman from Northern Iraq who had to drive for 12 hours through dangerous militia-held towns to reach Baghdad Airport after ISIS occupied her region and shut down the nearby airport; the cohort from Damascus who dodged mortar attacks on their drive to Beirut and spent eight hours at the Lebanese-Syrian border; the Yemeni participant

who, after Sana'a Airport was bombed, had to board a cattle-ship from Aden to Djibouti, where he spent 48 hours in detention, then flew to Jordan to face another 8 hours of interrogation and abuse before arriving three days late to Beirut; the Egyptian cohort, each of whom had to prove that they carry \$2,000 in cash at Beirut airport before being allowed in; and the Palestinian professor from Ramallah who spent over 12 hours maneuvering Israeli checkpoints and Jordanian

to engage local academics and activists and get their buy-in, while simultaneously guiding MDLAB's strategy and long-term goals.

Key to MDLAB's mission is the building of curricula rooted in the region, and the programs included several TOT sessions focused on devising media literacy syllabi and lectures. Each national group worked together on outlining the topics and objectives of the ideal media literacy course they hoped to introduce to their countries, and each individual developed a short lecture focused on one of these topics. The end result was a diverse archive of curricula built by locals who understand their cultures and educational systems and posted online in an open environment for anyone to use. More importantly, the participants had ownership of these curricula and did not perceive them as foreign programs descended upon them from the West. In addition, post academy analysis of these curricula and focus groups with participants over the past four years revealed important overlapping themes and needs for the region, including:

*More importantly, the participants had ownership of these curricula and did not perceive them as foreign programs descended upon them from the West.*

security only to be turned back home at Beirut Airport after the border officials noticed an Israeli stamp on his passport. Somehow these stories of Arab countries discriminating against their own peoples unified the diverse mixture of participants, especially given the irony that the International speakers who mainly came from the US and the EU had the easiest time entering the country.

But these differences were not the main challenge during the inaugural year of MDLAB. With every lecture and workshop, participants grew more excited yet more skeptical about the relevance of media literacy to the Arab world at a time when the whole region seemed to be plunged into every political, military, social and economic crisis humanity can offer. The issue was that media literacy in the US and Europe mainly deals with problems of the developed world. Because the Arab region had a dearth of media literacy experts, MDLAB invited renowned international media educators, such as Renee Hobbs, Henry Jenkins, Susan Moeller, Stephen Reese, Paul Mihailidis, Sut Jhally, and Moses Shumow. The hope was that, with time, local capacity would become sufficient. The topics they covered, such as news construction, visual culture, the political economy of news, advertising and propaganda, representation of gender, race and sexuality, are standard topics in most US media literacy curricula. While most participants agreed about their importance, they did not see them as sufficient for the region during this period. This provided an early challenge for MDLAB to establish its legitimacy as a local organization, but it also offered an important opportunity

1. Adding topics and lectures relevant to the Arab world, such as media and religious sectarianism and fundamentalism; propaganda used by violent extremists; the relationship between media and terrorism; political propaganda during conflicts; rumor management in war times; media and social movements; media and religious and racial minorities of the Arab world; representation and stereotypes of Arabs in Arab media (not only in Western media).
2. Providing examples, illustrations, and case studies from the region to support lectures and workshops, for instance: ownership trends in the Arab media industry; media uses of Arab youth; cases of online surveillance and privacy risks from the region; dominant images of women in local Arab media and advertising; examples of racism and sectarianism on Arab TV; examples of cyberbullying and other media effects on children; case studies of propaganda used by violent extremists, such as ISIS;

local examples related to civic engagement and participatory culture.

3. Developing advanced technical capacities, such as social network analysis and data literacy, which go beyond the basic digital production skills.
4. Offering malleable curricula and exercises that can be easily injected into existing university courses and programs instead of stand-alone courses, and may be offered as workshops to activists, journalists, and civil society organizations.
5. Producing media literacy research, reading materials, and textbooks in Arabic.

While the list seemed quite long and partly disheartening, it nevertheless provided a roadmap for the future and helped MDLAB revise its strategy and focus on real needs for the region. More importantly, it provided participants with a sense of mission and concrete goals to pursue when they returned to their countries. However, the most daunting goal remained looming over everyone's head: how to maneuver national educational systems and introduce media literacy to their countries at a time of turmoil and increased state surveillance and anxiety?

The mission seemed impossible, especially for public universities that are directly controlled by the whims of education ministers who are more interested in political survival than in improving their country's educational systems. The first year of the academy ended and participants departed with doubt about the prospects of facing their countries' inflexible education structures. Even MDLAB organizers were not very hopeful. But news started trickling in over the next few months. MDLAB participants—the agents of change in their countries—were posting on social media news about workshops and seminars aimed at promoting the merits of media and digital literacy education for their communities. Soon enough, several private universities succeeded in introducing media literacy courses and modules into their programs. However, no advances were reported at public universities, which happen to enroll the vast majority of Arab students—in many cases over 95% of all college students in the country. Administrators did not see its merit and ministries were largely inaccessible to junior

faculty—the most passionate and energetic advocates.

During the second year of the academy, at the suggestion of former participants, MDLAB invited senior professors, chairpersons, deans and even representatives of education ministries from various Arab countries, as well as representatives from internation-



al organizations, such as UNESCO and UNAOC. They were invited to the last three days of the academy to engage in high-level discussions and witness their compatriots and students present what they learned. The strategy worked. These senior participants provided political clout and cover to the junior faculty and graduate students who were doing the legwork.

Then news suddenly came from Syria: Damascus University introduced a media literacy course. This provided an enormous push to everyone and a turning point for MDLAB. If a public university in war-torn Syria can do this, anyone can. A year later, Iraqi participants celebrated the decision of their education

### *How to maneuver national educational systems and introduce media literacy to their countries at a time of turmoil and increased state surveillance and anxiety?*

ministry to require media literacy in all Iraqi public universities. By the fourth year of the academy, over 30 Arab universities (and a handful of schools) had introduced media literacy courses and modules. All this was achieved by passionate local academics and activists determined to see media and digital literacy



flourish in their countries. In the process, MDLAB managed to create a network of academics, activists, and researchers capable of developing and promoting media literacy for their own societies. Their agency overcame entrenched impediments and outmaneuvered obstinate structures of the Arab world's education systems.

The media literacy programs they introduced are as diverse as the individuals who advocated for them. Nevertheless, all carried some of the tenets of media literacy that have been advocated by MDLAB, which resonate with the approach of a group of international media literacy academics tied to the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change, and who are sometimes referred to as the "Salzburg school of media literacy."

*The hope is to build a critical mass of educators able to defend the principles and values of media literacy and a resilient culture that is able to resist any attempted perversion of its mission.*

These tenets include: integrating media literacy concepts and critical theories with digital competencies and production/composition abilities; contextualizing media literacy pedagogies within global and local issues of social justice and human rights; developing teaching and learning methods that aim for individual and communal empowerment and emancipation; tying media literacy to action through civic engagement, political activism, and the development of a participa-

tory and tolerant global culture; and finally promoting locally rooted curricula and disseminating knowledge globally in an open and free environment.

### **Conclusion: Where do we go from here?**

Despite all their magnificent accomplishments, Arab media literacy educators still require massive support, and the nascent state of Arab media literacy remains vulnerable and threatened, especially by the same political structures that hindered its advance. The scenario of entrenched political interests co-opting media literacy to serve state propaganda and narrow political interests remain real, especially if the top-down educational governance systems persisted. The hope is to build a critical mass of educators able to defend the principles and values of media literacy and a resilient culture that is able to resist any attempted perversion of its mission. This requires generalizing media literacy to the whole educational system and beyond.

Therefore, next on the list of challenges is to help push media literacy into schools. While MDLAB has been engaged in helping some Lebanese schools, such as International College (IC), Jesus and Mary, and Al Kawthar, to build their media literacy capacities, many MDLAB alumni have been doing the same in other Arab countries. The Jordan Media Institute—a key MDLAB partner—is working on schools (and universities) in Jordan with the help of UNESCO, while other initiatives have been reported in Qatar, Egypt, and the UAE. Still, enormous efforts remain, and MDLAB hopes that by 2020 every Arab country will have at least one university and one school teaching media literacy and leading the effort to promote and develop it further in its own country.

Simultaneously, MDLAB hopes to help bolster the production of local media literacy texts, studies, and other intellectual and pedagogical material. This will require more time and major investment from internal and external players. A hopeful sign is the increased number of graduate students interested in focusing their theses and dissertations on media literacy. A possible key strategy in this area would be the establishment of local MA and Ph.D. programs in media and digital literacy—a matter MDLAB and its home university, the Lebanese American University, is considering seriously. ❖

# Fostering Agency Through Media Literacy

By Martin Rayala, Ph.D.

**Martin Rayala**, Ph.D. is the co-founder and Chief Academic Officer for Design-Lab High School, an XQ Super School award recipient in Newark, Delaware. While he was a Curriculum Supervisor for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, he worked with Marieli Rowe to develop the Journal of Media Literacy from a small newsletter to the journal it is today. After retiring from the State Education Agency Dr. Rayala taught at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania and then retired to develop Design-Lab Schools with CEO Dr. Cristina Alvarez. His numerous honors include NTC's 2015 Jessie McCause award.



[Meliorism] [Design Thinking] [critical thinking] [Visualization] [collaboration] [communication]

**A**gency is the capacity to be autonomous and exercise personal power to achieve one's own goals. Many people feel powerless and lack agency when confronted with large, complex problems. Students feel they live their lives under the will of parents and teachers. Teachers feel they lack agency in determining what and how they teach. School administrators feel constrained by state and national mandates. Many parents feel they have little power at work and scant input into how schools educate their children. Voters sometimes feel they have little real say in how their country is run. A feeling of lack-of-agency is an ongoing challenge to progress.

## Gaining Agency Through Media Literacy

Media Literacy is one of the skills to enable us to gain agency over some aspects of our lives. Media literacy has traditionally meant the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms. The ability to read and write gives people some power in their lives. Freedom to express oneself is a power granted to Americans by their Constitution. Being a media-wise citizen gives one powers over scammers, liars, charlatans and cheats. Being media literate provides agency in the affairs of our lives.

It was only a few decades ago that we had little agency or control over the media we consumed. Producing newspapers, magazines, radio, television and movies required considerable resources, and media was controlled by a handful of (usually male) powerful producers and distributors. With the advent of the

digital age, our ability to produce and distribute our own media has increased drastically. Today, growing numbers of people not only watch movies but produce and distribute their own videos. Students not only play but create their own video games.

## Embracing Meliorism

I find it curious that the words “meliorism” and “meliorist” are not common terms in our vocabulary. “Meliorism” is the attitude or belief that the world can be made better through human effort. There are no synonyms or other terms commonly used that mean quite the same thing. “Optimism” is a term that gets close in regard to believing that things are going to turn out okay or get better, but it lacks that extra understanding that this can happen through human agency or effort.

Meliorism would seem to be a prerequisite to having agency in one's life. You have to believe that you have some control over the direction your life takes or how things are going to turn out. One has to be confident in one's ability to be the captain of one's own ship.

## Becoming Design Thinkers

Once we are convinced that we can improve our lot in life through our own efforts, there are some skills to be developed to help us become confident in our problem-solving abilities. An invaluable tool in the path to becoming a problem-solver is Design Thinking.

Design Thinking is an iterative process that involves a variety of actions. It is useful to break the De-

sign Thinking process for problem solving into four basic steps:

1. Identifying and defining the problem.
2. Generating alternatives and potential solutions.
3. Prototyping and testing promising possibilities.
4. Presenting results to others to be evaluated for potential implementation.

### Identifying the Problem

As strange as it may sound, people spend a lot of time and energy trying to solve the wrong problems. For example, if we take on a complex problem like improving student learning in elementary and secondary schools, where do we begin? Is the solution to be found by examining how students learn, how teachers teach, how parents parent, how schools school, how society values education, how the costs of education are paid, or some other factor we might not even have thought of? One of the keys to successful problem-solving is to take a little extra time, to dig deeper, to ask more questions and really develop the most effective and powerful statement of the problem.

### Generating potential solutions

The world famous design firm, IDEO, calls the next step in the Design Thinking process “Ideation,” the process of generating, developing and communicating new ideas. Some use *brainstorming*, a group problem-solving technique that involves the spontaneous contribution of ideas from all members of the group. I call this step *Visualization* because it is important to get the ideas out in the open in a tangible, visible form where people can see them, add to them, build on them, elaborate and generate more and better ideas. Here again, stopping this process too soon is the reason many problems are not effectively solved.

### Prototyping Promising Solutions

Some ideas might sound and look good on paper but don't hold up in real life. That's why it is important to prototype ideas and develop preliminary models to try out potential solutions in quick, easy, inexpensive ways. Prototypes can take the form of models, storyboards, concept drawings, samples, templates, rough

drafts, or any number of tangible, testable examples. Thoroughness and diligence in prototyping can save a great deal of time, money and resources later.

It is important to distinguish two different uses for the terms *prototype*, *model* and *design*. In this case we are using the terms in their verb—rather than noun—forms. To *prototype*, to *model* or to *design* is to ask questions, investigate and test hypotheses. These terms are used later in the design process as nouns because they are answers to the questions and presentations of possible solutions.

*Prototyping* in design is related to a *hypothesis* in science. It is a supposition or proposed explanation made on the basis of limited evidence as a starting point for further investigation and testing. In the next step of the design process where we present our ideas, the terms *prototype*, *model* and *design* become nouns where they are more related to the concept of “theory” in science accepted as a valid explanation of a phenomenon. As a verb in the design process, prototyping is a set of questions or a hypothesis to be tested. As a noun, the model, prototype or design is a proposed answer to the question, like a scientific theory.

### Presenting Viable Solutions

In school settings it is desirable—but not always possible—to actually implement solutions in the real world. For this reason, we expect students to be able to present their solutions to others in a clear and compelling manner for the purposes of feedback and evaluation. This is sometimes referred to as “pitching an idea.”

It is often as difficult to convince someone of the quality of an idea as it is to generate an innovative idea. With the advent of *TED Talks* and TV shows like *Shark Tank*, the bar has been raised for the ability to present ideas. It is important to present ideas in the form of stories that are engaging, personal and illustrate a larger point with a specific, relatable example.

### Creating Design-Lab High

In 2013, Dr. Cristina Alvarez and I wrote the charter for an innovative high school called *Design-Lab High* that was approved by the Delaware Department of Education and opened in 2015. This school was designed specifically to give students a sense of agency and em-



powerment and provide them with the tools and skills to become problem solvers. In 2016, *Design-Lab High* was named a Winner in the XQ Super School Challenge created by Laurene Powell Jobs, widow of the late Steve Jobs, founder of Apple Computers, to rethink high schools for the 21st century. Mrs. Jobs created the XQ Super School Challenge because most schools continue to follow a century-old model developed for a time when students were being prepared to enter factories and work on farms. Today, conformity and consistency are being replaced by new skills in creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication.

Students and teachers at *Design-Lab High* are challenged to use 5 fundamental tools for thinking and communicating ideas: words, numbers, images, sounds, and movement. They develop linguistic, numerical, visual, acoustic and kinesthetic skills. Traditional schools focus only on the first two areas and concentrate on reading, writing and arithmetic at the expense of the others. The goal at *Design-Lab High* is to motivate learning by engaging students' brains and bodies fully and more comprehensively.

### Preparing for an Uncertain Future

Design-Lab High was designed to teach students problem-solving skills through Design Thinking and provide them the skills to take on the challenges of the 21st century. No one knows the form the future will take but it is clear that the next 30 years will be a most amazing time in the history of our planet.

The future will be greatly influenced by the exponential growth of technology and artificial intelligence. There will be some form of trans-humanism or post-humanism in which human intelligence and machine intelligence work together to create extraordinary natural, built, augmented, simulated, virtual and imagined realities beyond our current imaginations.

### A Future of Agency, Autonomy and Spontaneous Collaboration

In 1970, Buckminster Fuller declared that we have the necessary resources for everyone to live in peace and abundance if we—through spontaneous collaboration—employ Design Science to develop a future that works for all in the shortest time possible without harm-



Design-Lab High received a \$10 million XQ Super School Award at a ceremony in Washington D.C. The award was presented by musician MC Hammer (3rd from left) on behalf of Laurene Jobs (2nd from left) and Executive Director Russlyn Ali (3rd from right). Design-Lab founders Dr. Cristina Alvarez and Dr. Martin Rayala (center) along with students, Board members, school leaders, parents and community supporters who attended the ceremony.

ing the environment or any segment of the population.

Progress toward that goal has been pretty disappointing but there has been some. In a world still held back by racism and sexism, the United States elected Barack Obama as the first African American President and nominated Hillary Clinton as its first woman Presidential candidate. People are healthier and live longer than at any time in history. The standard of living for people around the world is improving at a painfully slow pace but is improving nonetheless. Contrary to current perceptions, the rate of violent crime continues to decline.

There is no guarantee, and things can still go terribly wrong, but as Design Thinking, problem-solving meliorists, it is our responsibility to apply our creativity and critical thinking skills to communicate with the global community and continue to collaboratively solve problems. ❄

### REFERENCES

- Buckminster Fuller <https://bfi.org/>
- Decline of Violence <https://www.amazon.com/Better-Angels-Our-Nature-Violence/dp/0143122010>
- Design-Lab High <http://design-labschools.org>
- Frog Design <http://www.frogdesign.com/work/frog-collective-action-toolkit.html>
- [http://www.historyliteracy.org/scripts/search\\_display.php?Article\\_ID=249](http://www.historyliteracy.org/scripts/search_display.php?Article_ID=249)
- IDEO <http://www.ideo.com/about/>
- Prototyping <https://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/prototyping.html>
- Shark Tank <http://abc.go.com/shows/shark-tank>
- TED Talks [https://www.ted.com/talks/chris\\_anderson\\_teds\\_secret\\_to\\_great\\_public\\_speaking?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_anderson_teds_secret_to_great_public_speaking?language=en)
- The Singularity is Near <http://singularity.com/>
- Visualization <https://www.ted.com/topics/visualizations>
- XQ Super School Challenge [www.xqsuperschool.org](http://www.xqsuperschool.org)

# Newspapers in Education: Acquiring Future Customers, or Serving Future Citizens?

## On the suitability of Japan's *Newspapers in Education* as agents for promoting media literacy

By Yoshimi Uesugi, Ph.D.



**Dr. Yoshimi Uesugi** is an Associate Professor at the Curriculum Center for Teachers, Tokyo Gakugei University. In 2008, she published *Media Literacy Education in Canada* (Akashi Shoten, in Japanese) which was based on her dissertation. Her recent research interests include school commercialism and teaching about advertising in consumer education. She teaches undergraduate and graduate media literacy courses.

---

[Japan newspaper industry] [journalism Japan] [Japan media education] [journalism bias] [Newspapers in Education Japan]

### 1. Why utilize newspapers in schools in the Digital Age?

In this article, I focus on NIE, which stands for “*Newspapers in Education*” in Japan and refers to educational activities chiefly led by a newspaper industry group, and examine NIE’s suitability for promoting agency through media literacy.

Taking up educational activities involving newspapers may seem outdated in the Digital Age. In fact, we can see how the newspaper industry in Japan right now is stagnating in two respects.

*Rather, one can often see examples of newspaper publishers attaching great importance to maintaining and developing friendly relations with the government for their own survival.*

First, newspaper circulation is on the decline. According to statistics published on the website of the Japan Newspaper Publishers & Editors Association (*Nihon Shinbun Kyokai*, NSK), to which nearly all newspaper companies that publish daily general

newspapers in Japan belong, Japan has one of the largest number of newspaper issues published per 1,000 adults in the world.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the ongoing trend of losing subscribers to Internet news sites is the same in Japan as it is in other countries. The other respect is that newspapers’ role in monitoring authority, i.e. their watchdog role, is weakening. Unfortunately, in Japan, there is not much evidence of attempts on the part of newspaper publishers, who are facing declining circulation, to win back subscribers by reasserting that role. Rather, one can often see examples of newspaper publishers attaching great importance to maintaining and developing friendly relations with the government for their own survival.

Despite this stagnation at the core of the newspaper industry, newspaper publishers have been working to offer assistance to schools. There has been a surge in the publication of NIE-related books as well as in educational activities carried out by newspaper publishers, spurred on by the explicit mention of the use of newspapers in classes—chiefly in Japanese-language classes—in the 2011 Course of Study. The lowering of the voting age from 20 to 18, which went into effect in the summer of 2016, calls for a more thorough education in politics in schools, and the use of

newspapers in that education is an issue that has received much attention. Furthermore, although Japan's Course of Study does not provide for systematic media literacy education for all years, the notion of media literacy is introduced in textbooks in several subjects. For this reason, we can conclude that NIE makes use of newspaper staff who are experts in obtaining and thoroughly checking information, editing and publishing, to function as an agency that promotes the attainment of media literacy by students.

In the following, by tracing the history of NIE in Japan and by substantiating the issues faced by the newspaper industry in recent years, I explore the dual nature of NIE as an agent, namely that NIE is simultaneously a means of acquiring future customers as well as a means of encouraging agency in future citizens. Lastly, I identify the conditions under which NIE can play a healthy role in promoting media literacy education.

## **2. A shift in the purpose of newspapers in the classroom: From democratization to promoting sales**

The educational use of newspapers in Japanese schools had already begun in the 1870s, when the country's modern educational system was established.<sup>2</sup> It was only in the immediate years after the conclusion of the Second World War, however, that newspapers came to be incorporated extensively in classrooms, specifically as part of the democratization policies instituted at the time. For example, in the 1947 Course of Study (a tentative plan at the time) published for the newly-established classes in social studies, it was proposed that newspaper articles relating to the administrative authorities and assemblies be used as materials for ninth-year students in their political studies unit, and that they learn about the relationship among newspaper editors, political power, and advertisers. It has also been noted that around this time it became common throughout the country for middle- and high-school students to edit and publish school newspapers.<sup>3</sup> A certain national newspaper publisher supported teachers who were interested in utilizing newspaper in their classrooms.<sup>4</sup>

However, the prominence of the above blending of journalistic and educational democratization lasted only until the first half of the 1950s. Following that, as

the Allied occupation ended and the momentum of democracy seen in the years immediately following the war waned in the new Cold War order, mention of using newspapers disappeared from the Course of Study, giving way to a long period in which a small number of passionate teachers continued to use newspapers in their teaching, independently of the official curriculum.

The 1980s saw the beginning of organized newspaper education led by the newspaper industry. This was the start of NIE in Japan. More specifically, it began in 1985 with a proposal by NSK for an NIE program. According to Akira Seno, who had a background in the sales division of a newspaper publisher and was serving as the first head of NSK's special committee on NIE, the impetus for the program came when

*It is apparent that using schools to make overtures to the younger generation also appealed to the sales personnel at Japanese newspaper publishers as a means of increasing future subscriber numbers.*

members of NSK's Circulation Committee joined a convention of the International Circulation Managers Association and also visited newspaper publishers in the United States, where they were exposed to NIE in theory and practice. Seno writes in his book that in the U.S., newspaper publishers and figures in the world of education had been cooperating to promote the use of newspapers in education out of a sense of urgency caused by the phenomena of children and other young people reading less printed matter, including newspapers.<sup>5</sup> It is apparent that using schools to make overtures to the younger generation also appealed to the sales personnel at Japanese newspaper publishers as a means of increasing future subscriber numbers.

Subsequently, beginning at the end of the 1980s, prefectures throughout Japan began to establish NIE promotion councils.<sup>6</sup> These councils are made up of companies that publish newspapers in the community, the local boards of education, and schools with an interest in NIE. A leading program offered jointly by these prefectural councils and NSK is the designated NIE school system. Schools that apply to become designated NIE schools are provided with one copy of every national newspaper issued in that area as well as one copy of the local newspapers (generally a to-

tal of five to ten newspapers) free of charge for several months. This system was created on the general principle that the individual publishers would not use the program as a means to promote sales.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, however, this clearly demonstrates that the publishers are very interested in finding out whether their participation in NIE programs lead to increases in the circulation of their respective papers.

As for the extent of the development of media literacy education in Japan around this time, the very notion of media literacy itself had yet to take hold. It was not until the coming century that interest came to be shown in NIE as an agency of media literacy promotion.

In recent years there has been a growing trend for publishers to offer educational programs to schools on their own, independent of NSK frameworks. Special

their own independent activities, they cannot expect to see a spread in the use of newspapers in schools, much less the resulting increase in overall circulation.

### **3. Contribution by weak journalism to the cultivation of civic-minded citizens?**

When schools consent to programs that provide instructors and educational materials from corporations whose intent is clearly to advertise products and services, there is the danger of undermining an education rooted in impartial information, upon which democracy is predicated. This is because corporate sponsored educational programs are offered as part of publicity and advertising campaigns for the respective companies, and as such, for the most part those companies essentially provide information that is convenient for them. Alex Molnar and Faith Boninger of the University of Colorado Boulder, who are known for their research in school commercialism, write that, “It is never in a sponsor’s interest for children to learn to identify and evaluate its points of view and biases, to consider alternative points of view, or to generate and consider alternative solutions to problems.”<sup>10</sup>

If we look at the practices of NIE in terms of its appropriateness as an agent promoting media literacy from a perspective that is critical of such educational activities by corporations, we inevitably encounter a number of questions. Specifically, in NIE classes, there is a tendency to portray the role that newspapers play in society in a favorable light. Conversely, ideas that are critical of them—for example questions as to whether a newspaper is properly fulfilling its role as a watchdog of authority—are rarely made the topics of classes. It is reasonable to conclude that, as stated above, the historical motive of promoting newspaper sales, which was one of the reasons that NIE was begun, has had an effect on this trend. This is to say, in classes led by corporations, one cannot expect them to go out of their way to point out the weaknesses of their product.

In a class for elementary school students sponsored by a certain publisher, an employee of the publisher teaches students about the process of producing newspapers, e.g. how to collect information, how to write articles, how to lay out a newspaper page, etc. This employee says that she views that class as “the

*This is to say, in classes led by corporations, one cannot expect them to go out of their way to point out the weaknesses of their product.*

classes taught by reporters visiting schools, the creation and provision of teacher lesson guides, and the sponsoring of teacher seminars are the focus of the publishers’ educational programs. More specifically, reporters give lectures and such to students and teachers on the process of producing a newspaper, or on topics taken up by their newspaper (environmental issues, for example). Such educational programs by newspaper publishing companies—particularly the school visit programs—are in part an extension of the CSR activities that became prevalent among private-sector companies in the 2000s and the years since. In school visit programs, companies refrain from conspicuously advertising their products, but they do disclose the names of their companies in the classroom and work to foster a sense of familiarity with and trust in their brands.<sup>8</sup>

The current practice of corporations seeking access to students and teachers on their own, and trying to cultivate them as customers in this manner is antithetical to the principle of fairness in NIE set out by NSK, but under the pretext of spreading the use of newspapers, it is accepted as an NIE policy.<sup>9</sup> The reason is likely that newspaper publishers know that, absent

work of instilling in the minds of the children the notion that ‘even though they are children, they are still members of society, and newspapers are windows to society.’”<sup>11</sup> Put differently, the aim of the class was getting elementary school students, who had little prior familiarity with newspapers, to understand the importance of reading the newspaper in leading proper, civic-minded lives. While that aim in itself may be a reasonable one, we cannot but conclude that an interested party, namely an employee of the newspaper, is laying out only the positive aspects of that newspaper, and this amounts to a lack of fairness.

In classes taught by school teachers as well, the focus is typically on teaching students how to use newspapers, rather than on critically discussing the quality of articles with them. In the following, I wish to look at a specific example of newspapers being used in teaching civics to high school students.

In 2015, revisions were made to the law in Japan so that the voting age was lowered from 20 to 18 years, which has encouraged the development of education in politics in schools, especially high schools. An NIE website presented a practical project, which took place before the legal revisions were made, that combined mock voting with newspapers in the classroom. According to the account, during general elections held following the dissolution of the House of Representatives in late 2014, a civics teacher at a prefectural school in Chiba, which had been designated as an NIE school, conducted a class project that consisted of mock voting for third-year students taking the *Politics and Economics* course.<sup>12</sup>) During the class project, newspapers were used as materials to give students an understanding of the various parties’ policies, to compare those policies, and to engage in group discussions on the issues. The students relied on newspaper articles to decide on which party to vote for, which in effect let them learn ways of utilizing newspapers in making decisions as voters.

It is true that newspapers do attempt to provide readers with in-depth, easy-to-comprehend explanations of and commentaries on the policies of the various parties, and as such are an effective resource for comparing and considering policy in the classroom, as well as being attractive to teachers, as they are easy to use as educational materials by virtue of being print media. However, the method of using newspapers in

a high school setting in the example described above lacks the critical step of evaluating the quality of individual newspaper articles as bases for making decisions. Newspapers each have their own political leanings, which are reflected in how their articles represent the policies of the respective political parties. Or it may well be that these leanings affect the standards by which newspapers choose which among the many policy issues to take up in their pages. Put differently,

*We cannot read election coverage properly without paying attention to the distance between the political parties and the newspaper publishers.*

It is also possible that newspapers are serving as the de facto public relations arms of specific political parties. We cannot read election coverage properly without paying attention to the distance between the political parties and the newspaper publishers.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that the political administration and major media corporations are close in distance in Japan right now has been noted by freelance journalists active in Japan and correspondents for foreign media alike. One example often pointed to in this context is that the executives and experienced political reporters of major media corporations sometimes dine with



Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, with their conversations treated as off the record. One political reporter who has participated in these dinners answered his colleague in one of his own paper’s articles: “As a political reporter, I want to make the most of news-gathering opportunities in which I can ascertain with what sort of con-

victions the prime minister, who is the most powerful person [in the country], conducts politics.”<sup>14</sup>) Because comments at such dinners are all off the record, explanations to the effect that it was a normal news-gathering, journalistic encounter are not very convincing. On the other hand, Waseda University’s Akihiro Non-

lishers is not over fidelity to journalistic principles or the desire to satisfy readers’ needs for quality reporting, but over quid pro quo “leaks” from the political administration.

Returning to the discussion on the topic of the use of newspapers in civics education, as a practical matter it may be difficult to discuss the distance between the government and the media—which is likely to be seen as crucial for the education of the citizenry—especially at the elementary level. Furthermore, it would also take a certain amount of time for them to understand what is involved in each and every political issue, such as employment and national security policies. With their already overloaded class schedules, it may prove extremely difficult to have them not only learn the political issues but also examine the nature of newspaper reporting. To this end, we must understand that, in the interests of developing civic-minded citizens, the facts of our advanced information society means that examining the role of the media in political and election reporting—

namely whether that reporting is monitoring the government or advertising for it—is an inescapable task.

#### 4. Toward the cultivation of a reasonable ability to monitor the media

As we have seen so far, when students try to form opinions about the problems that society faces, newspapers are a convenient source of detailed information and points of contention, and for that reason they have been useful as educational materials at schools. Nevertheless, one can hardly conclude that these newspapers are sufficiently fulfilling their roles as watchdogs of power. Hence, when utilizing newspapers, the task of evaluating the performance of newspaper publishers and their reporters is a necessary one.

One conceivable measure to improve civics education as addressed in the previous section is to introduce the practice of comparative reading using op-ed pieces published in different newspapers on the same day, and articles on the same topic from different newspapers, a practice that has already been incor-



aka, who is engaged in journalist education and who is himself a journalist, has leveled sharp criticisms of these dinners, writing, “If executives of media institutions did have confidential meetings with politicians at restaurants, that is not ‘news-gathering.’ Contact of that nature, in which readers are not informed of what was said, and which leads to suspicions of collusion, is an act of journalistic suicide.”<sup>15</sup>

Media reporting that may invite suspicions of collusion with the political administration at times takes on the tinge of manipulation of public opinion by the government, which is the polar opposite of media as a watchdog. For example, instead of giving intensive coverage to the major policies of the administration, the media may refrain from reporting issues that are damaging to the administration or underestimate such issues. In return for cooperating with the administration, newspapers are given information to fill their pages. As a result, newspaper publishers are able to advertise to people their own ability to report on political developments accurately and in depth. The reality is that competition among newspaper pub-

porated into NIE. In mock voting, it is true that the central activities are to compare and discuss the policies of the various political parties, but an essential element of comparative reading would be that students learn that depending on the publisher, the assessments of parties' manifestos and the issues they focus on differ. Furthermore, it is likewise important to use the differences among newspapers to gauge the distances between the administration, the political parties, and the newspaper publishers, and to discuss the propriety thereof. Through this process, by including in their comparisons non-newspaper sources, i.e. news articles by media companies that only make their news available online, students could also learn the characteristics of online news.

In addition, after completing the above tasks, it would also be possible to create opportunities, for example, to invite reporters with experience covering politics into classrooms, where students learn about methods of political and election reporting, and discuss the appropriateness of such reporting with the reporters. Through such methods, it is hoped that NIE has the potential to develop in students the ability to think about and practice ways of monitoring the media in a reasonable manner.

Moreover, the purposes of NIE in its present state constitute two sides of the same coin, i.e., "acquiring future customers" and "serving future citizens," yet it is possible to conceive of new mechanisms whose purpose is only the latter as alternatives to NIE. More specifically, I mean mechanisms by which journalists and media editors give support to the fostering of civic ideals at schools, regardless of the corporation or type of media with which they are affiliated, or even as individuals. For the development of civic society, it is not only necessary to have newspapers and a citizenry who utilizes them in the context of political participation, but also to have media outlets and journalists that serve as watchdogs of power and a citizenry that needs them. It is anticipated that a citizenry, including students, that check the work of the media and engages in dialogue with journalists, has ultimately exercised its agency through media literacy. ❖

## FOOTNOTES

- 1) Nihon Shinbun Kyokai (n.d.). Retrieved April 19, 2016, from <http://www.pressnet.or.jp/data/circulation/circulation04.html>
- 2) Yanagisawa, S. (2009). *Shinbun Kyouiku no Genten: Bakumatsu Meiji kara Senryouki Nihon no Jaanarizumu to Kyouiku (The Origins of Newspaper Education: Journalism and Education in Japan from the Bakumatsu/Meiji Periods to the Period of Occupation)*, Kyoto: Sekaishisoshia, pp. 208-214.
- 3) Ibid., pp. 276-278.
- 4) Ibid., pp. 321-325.
- 5) Seno, A. (2004). *NIE no 20-nen (Twenty Years of NIE)*, Tokyo: Bansei Shobo, p. 18.
- 6) Ibid., p. 46.
- 7) Ibid., p. 44.
- 8) For example, when employees from a potato chip manufacturer visit an elementary school to give nutrition classes, they tell to students that potato chips are not unhealthy as long as one does not eat too many of them at a time. See Uesugi, Y (2009) e Corporate Presence in Japanese Classrooms, *Our Schools/Our Selves*, 18(4), pp 163-165.
- 9) Uchino, T. (2008). Kyouchou wo Juushi shita 'Nihon Gata' (The Japanese Model that Stresses Harmony). In *Jouhou Dokkairyoku wo Sodateru NIE Handobukku (NIE Handbook for Developing Information Literacy)*, edited by Nihon NIE Gakkai (Japan Society for Studies in "Newspaper in Education"), Tokyo: Meiji Tosho, pp. 289-290.
- 10) Molnar, A. and Boninger, F. (2015). *Sold Out: How Marketing in School Threatens Children's Well-being and Undermines Their Education*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, p.130.
- 11) Kimura, Y. (2015). Kisha to Gakkou Kouryuu: Kisha Haken deno Jissen (Academic Exchange with Reporters: In Practice in Sending Reporters). In *Shinbun de Hagukumu, Tsunagu (Fostering and Connecting with Newspapers)*, edited by Nihon NIE Kenkyuukai, Tokyo: Toyokan Shuppansha, pp. 76-79.
- 12) Nihon Shinbun Kyokai (n.d.). Retrieved April 19, 2016, from [http://nie.jp/report/selected/archive/20150308\\_009878.html](http://nie.jp/report/selected/archive/20150308_009878.html)
- 13) The website that describes this endeavor does not indicate the number of newspaper brands used in the classroom. This fact itself could be said to show that the teacher is not sufficiently aware of the problem of distance between political parties and newspapers.
- 14) Fujiwara, S. (2015, January 14). Shushou no Shokujidai, Dare ga Shiharau? (Who pays for the dinner with prime minister?). *Asahi Shimbun (morning)*, p.4.
- 15) Nonaka, A. (2015). Jaanarizumu no Kiki to Rekkasuru Shakai (The crisis of journalism and a degrading society). In *Igakari: Genpatsu 'Yoshida Chousho' Kiji Torikeshi Jiken to Asahi Shimbun no Meisou (False Accusation: The Incident Involving the Deletion of Articles on the 'Yoshida Report' on Nuclear Power Plant and the Straying of Asahi Shimbun)*, edited by "Genpatsu 'Yoshida Chousho' Kiji Torikeshi Jiken to Asahi Shimbun no Meisou" Henshuu Iinkai, Tokyo: Nanatsumori Shokan, p. 303.

English titles of books, book chapters and articles in parentheses in notes were translated by the author.

# Promoting Media Literacy in China: The Agency Effort

By Alice Y. L. Lee



**Professor Alice Y. L. Lee** is the Head of the Department of Journalism, Hong Kong Baptist University. Her research interests include online news media, media education, media and information literacy (MIL), and Net Generation. She is the vice-chairperson of the Hong Kong Association of Media Education and has been promoting media education movement in Hong Kong and mainland China.

---

[Children's Palace] [media literacy] [Giddens] [structuration theory]

Chinese media literacy celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2017. Over the years, media education has gradually grown. Although the Chinese Government has no objection to the development of media education, there are no government measures or special funding schemes. The promotion of media literacy in China mainly depends on the effort of enthusiastic media educators. Their agency efforts bring media education to many schools and children's centers. Based on Anthony

zation which helps children to be engaged in extra-curricular activities, such as playing games, learning music, doing sports, joining cultural programs and attending various kinds of courses.

## Social Agency

Social scientists identify two major determinants of social phenomena: social structure and individual actions (human agency). Social structure is the objective complexes of social institutions within which people live and act while agency refers to the purposeful nature of human activity (Little, 2011). Giddens' (1984) structuration theory suggests that neither the existence of any form of control from the social system nor the act of the individual actor determines the social outcome. It is the structuration process of social practices that very often produces results. That means the structure and individual's behavior are intertwined during the interaction of social activities. Individuals go through a socialization process and are regulated by the existing social structures, but at the same time social structures are being altered by their activities. This paper follows Giddens' idea and focuses on the role of agency in promoting and practicing media education in Guangzhou.

In Giddens' work, "structural principles" means the use of rules and resources to regulate social relations. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently to accomplish tasks. To Giddens,

*Individuals go through a socialization process and are regulated by the existing social structures, but at the same time social structures are being altered by their activities.*

Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory, this paper introduces a case in China of how individual media educators can contribute to the development of media education.

The case under study is the media literacy initiatives in Guangzhou. In the past decade, media education programs have been rapidly developed in this city. Helped by the *Guangzhou Children's Palace*, many young children are now participating in media literacy activities. The Guangzhou Children's Palace Media Education Project has become one of the biggest and most sustainable media literacy programs in China. Children's Palace is a government-funded organi-



social agents are knowledgeable beings and purposive actors who know what they are doing. Their acting process is characterized by their motivation, rationalization of action and reflexive monitoring of action. When they conduct their projects, they will exercise their “practical consciousness” to transform rules and reallocate resources (Turner, 1986).

Therefore, agency effort means that autonomous individuals bring changes in society under a certain social structure. These individuals need to negotiate with the establishment to introduce change. They conduct purposeful and goal-directed activities. Giddens believes that structure and rules are not permanent and external, and they can be modified by human action through the structuration process.

### **Motivation and Goals: Nurturing Media Literate Chinese Youngsters**

In Guangzhou, the deputy director of Guangzhou Children’s Palace, Zhang Haibo, and his team have run a media education program since 2006 (Zhang, 2016). Zhang studied journalism and communication at university and worked for the news industry as a reporter, editor-in-chief and publisher. He was inspired by a Japanese newspaper counterpart who organized news-reading workshops for readers to help them better consume news so that readers can know more about the world and have critical understanding about social issues. After he came into contact with media literacy materials from Hong Kong and overseas, he started to conduct research on media literacy and became an expert. When he became the deputy director of Guangzhou Children’s Palace, he built his media literacy team by recruiting university media studies graduates and part-time media practitioners as instructors. He also applied for educational funding for conducting media literacy research projects.

Aware of the enormous influence of the Internet and mobile technologies on young people’s lives, he sought to promote media literacy in the city and to nurture media literate youngsters. His team’s goals were to help Chinese children grow up healthily in the digital age and make constructive use of new media in their everyday lives. Enhancing citizens’ quality and empowering young people were also important objectives of their media education programs.

Zhang and his team, as knowledgeable agents, published eleven books on media literacy, including some textbooks for primary school children, references for teachers and parents, and books on online safety education for children. One of the books is entitled *The Apple Generation: Study in the Media Life and Media Literacy Education for Millennials*.

### **Getting Endorsement from the Educational Authority**

According to structuration theory, agents constantly monitor the social context in which they take action. The Guangzhou media education team was aware of the socio-political setting in which they operated. In Canada or Hong Kong, advocates can set up media literacy associations on their own in the civil society to launch a media education movement. For example, Canada set up the AML (The Association for Media Literacy) and Hong Kong established the HKAME (Hong Kong Association for Media Education). In China, it is not easy to set up a non-government association. Moreover, any educational initiatives have to get an endorsement from the government and operate within the official system. The team fully understood that there was a need to meet the educational expectation of the Authority, and that it had to carry out the program in a legitimate institution.

*In the digital era, the educational authority hopes that Chinese citizens can be educated to constructively understand and use the media, know the world, rationally express opinions and positively conduct self-development.*

Although media literacy is a foreign concept in China, the Chinese educational authority regards media education as useful for cultivating quality citizens. In the digital era, the educational authority hopes that Chinese citizens can be educated to constructively understand and use the media, know the world, rationally express opinions and positively conduct self-development. A high-quality citizen is understood as a person who is knowledgeable about the society, literately competent and socially responsible. In particular, the educational authority is concerned with better guidance for preventing Internet addiction and rumor

spread. Besides, cultivating high-quality citizens is related to the training of a competent workforce. With knowledgeable and media literate citizens, it is expected that China can enhance its international competitiveness. Hence, the Guangzhou team was able to successfully seek support from the *Guangzhou Educational Bureau* and to set up a *Taskforce on Media Literacy Education for Adolescents in Guangzhou*. Shortly after, they established the *Guangzhou City Children's Palace Media Literacy Education Centre*.

Guangzhou is an affluent and technologically-advanced city. Guangzhou people have access to



various kinds of new media devices. There are great concerns about the social influence of the Internet and of digital media on children and adolescents. Training young people to be media literate and nurturing them as knowledgeable citizens fulfills the expectation of the Guangzhou educational authority.

### Media Education Action

The Guangzhou team has conducted a series of programs in the past ten years:

1. It established a number of interest groups and courses at the Guangzhou Children's Palace. Courses include media literacy elementary studies, young reporters' workshop, learning news reporting and editing,

understanding photography, and understanding broadcasting & anchoring.

2. Media education was introduced into 13 schools in Guangzhou.

The curriculum includes class lectures, student projects, media organization visits and community participation.

3. It promoted children's media literacy education to become national programs with extracurricular characteristics.

There are 18 Children's Palaces in different cities in China. A promotion was launched to hold media-literacy activities in these institutions annually. An innovative program entitled "new-media arts education" has recently been developed for children between three and six.

4. A series of media education textbooks and references for schoolteachers, students and parents was published.

The curriculum covered a wide variety of topics, such as news, advertising, video games, music, animation, mobile phones, and online security. It also introduced different kinds of media and their format characteristics.

5. Family media education has been developed and promoted.

In China, many families have only one child. Therefore, the parents care very much about the healthy development of their child. They are particularly concerned about the impact of new media on the youngsters. Family media education is well-received in the city.

6. It organized children to participate in an international Internet conference and to voice their views on Internet development.

7. It established the *Children's Media Literacy Education Research Center of the China National Youth Palace Association* and conducted children's media literacy research.

When the above-mentioned programs were carried out, the Guangzhou team, as media literacy agent,



exercised practical consciousness to make sure every move was rational and practical. It is what Giddens refers to as the *rationalization of action*. Moreover, they would constantly practice “reflexive monitoring.” That means they would honestly reflect on what had been done and see what could be improved and how to move forward. For example, as the digital and mobile technologies intensified their influence on young people, the Guangzhou team sensed concern from parents and even government officials. Therefore, they began to put more effort and resources into family media education to encourage parents to work with their children to understand the new media environment.

### Agency Makes Change

Applying the structuration theory to examine the media literacy initiative in Guangzhou, we can see that the program there, on the one hand, follows the state’s educational principles; and on the other hand, promotes an innovative media literacy program.

In Guangzhou, most of the schools are used to adopting the traditional way of teaching, which is teacher-centered. But the media literacy educators advocate the student-oriented pedagogic approach. The media literacy curricula in Guangzhou put emphasis on encouraging active learning and experiential learning. The teachers take the students outside the campus to visit media organizations, conduct community interviews and hold interesting media activities. The media literacy programs have contributed to the promotion of pedagogic reform.

Overall, the media literacy curriculum in Guangzhou focuses more on guiding the students to constructively use the media and ethically communicate through the media. The media literacy programs also encourage young students to learn to discriminate information, select information, and reflect on the authenticity of media messages. In particular, the teachers lead the students to question, explore and evaluate media and information obtained by the Internet.

In China, the educational authority has very tight control on the school curriculum and pedagogic issues. There is little critical thinking in other school curricula. But the media literacy educators were able to show to the educational authority that in the digital age, enhancing students’ critical thinking and reflective skills are essential for cultivating rational citizens as well as competent knowledge workers. Only the

*The teachers lead the students to question, explore and evaluate media and information obtained by the Internet.*

Chinese Net Generation young people have the analytical skills and media literacy competency necessary to participate in the global networked society.

In China, there is no educational policy on and little support for media literacy programs. The Guangzhou team demonstrated that agency could make media education possible in China. With motivation, knowledge, a reflective mind, rational action and practical consciousness, media advocates and educators can bring media literacy to many Chinese young people and help them meet the challenge of the digital age. \*

### REFERENCES

- Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Little, D. (2011). New ideas about structure and agency. *Understanding Society*. Retrieved June 27, 2016, from <http://understandingsociety.blogspot.hk/2011/03/new-ideas-about-structure-and-agency.html>
- Turner, J. H. (1986). Review on the constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration. *American Journal of Sociology*, 91 (4), 969-977.
- Zhang, H. (2016). Research and practice in media literacy education for the Apple Generation. Paper presented at the Sixth West Lake Media Literacy Summit, Hangzhou, May 7-8, 2016.

# Producing and Building My Citizenship: Media Education and the Human Rights of Young Women

By Raquel Ramírez Salgado



**Raquel Ramírez Salgado** holds a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Communication, and is a doctoral candidate, at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). She has been a teacher, workshop leader and speaker on the subjects of women's rights, the feminist gender perspective, and the media. She has collaborated with various public institutions in the training and development of awareness in public servants. Currently, she is part of the website ALEC: "Gender relations and social practices in Latin America, Europe and the Caribbean". In addition, she collaborates with the [mujeresnet.info](http://mujeresnet.info) site.

---

[gender perspective] [gender violence] [Mexico missing women] [feminism Mexico] [Nelly Stromquist] [Giddens]

## Introduction: Why it is important to talk about violence against women and sexual harassment

**B**efore describing the workshop it is crucial to understand the context of inequality and gender violence in Mexico, as well as the relevance of addressing and building, in formal and informal educational spaces, alternatives to the promotion of gender equality.

The report on the *Millennium Development Goals 2010* (July 7, 2011) noted that the political participation of women in Mexico had barely reached 28 percent. (In November 2011 the Federal Electoral Tribunal—TEPJF in Spanish—had issued a ruling that requires parties to be comprised of female candidates for federal deputy or senator to a minimum of 40 per cent.)

the group of people who work in domestic services, 90.42% are female. Also, according to the *National Survey on Time Use* (2009), women spend an average of 42 hours and 18 minutes a week on domestic work, compared to men at 15 hours and 18 minutes. The National Institute for Women (INMUJERES, in Spanish) has stated that "this increased workload for women has an impact on their opportunities for access to paid work."

But the most dramatic expression of gender inequality in Mexico is reflected in acts of violence against women. In July 2012, Amnesty International submitted to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) numbers reflecting a high rate of violence against women in Mexico: it is estimated that more than 74,000 violations were committed in 2011 (Amnesty International, 2012: 10).

*The Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Missing Women* states that from January 2008 to February 2012, more than 180 women and girls disappeared in Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua), and based on the research of this civil organization and others like *Our Daughters Back Home* (*Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*), there is information that proves the involvement of organized crime in the kidnapping of women and girls in the center of Ciudad Juárez in order to make them sex slaves—in the face of the indifference of the authorities.

*At least 34,000 women and girls were murdered in Mexico from 1985 to 2009.*

Another important indicator reflecting gender inequality in Mexico are the conditions in which women work. Occupational segregation persists, i.e., women and men continue to derive their activities from the sexual division of labor and gender roles. This information is based on results from the *National Survey of Occupation and Employment* (2010): 99.20% of workers as drivers or carriers are men, while of

During the LIX Legislature, the *Special Commission To and Follow Up Research on Femicide in Mexico and the Attorney General of Linked Justice* estimated that 1205 women and girls were killed across the country in 2004 and more than 6,000 women and girls were killed in 6 years, from 1999 to 2005. In November 2011, a joint report by the former *United Nations Development Fund for Women*, the National Institute for Women (INMUJERES, in Spanish) and the Special Commission for Monitoring Femicides, concluded that at least 34,000 women and girls were murdered in Mexico from 1985 to 2009.

The *General Law on Access of Women to a Life Free of Violence*, published in 2007, defines violence against women as: “Any action or omission based on gender, which causes harm or psychological, physical, patrimonial, economic, sexual suffering or death in both the private and the public space.” This legal instrument includes sexual harassment as a form of psychological and sexual violence, which can occur within the community as well as in the school environment and the workplace. Thus, the law indicates two exercises of domination over the victims:

- Sexual harassment in schools and in the workplace: the exercise of power, in a relationship of subordination of the victim to the aggressor. It is expressed verbally or physically (or both), related to lewd behavior with a sexual connotation.
- Sexual harassment at the community or family level: a form of violence in which, while there is no subordination, there is an abuse of power that leads to a state of helplessness and risk to the victim, regardless if it were performed one or more times.

Sexual harassment in Mexico is an emerging concern. A study by the Jurist Association (2012) revealed that 1.4 million women in Mexico experience sexual harassment in their workplaces.

Mexican young women and girls are a particularly vulnerable group. According to the *Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development* (OECD), in 2014 Mexico ranked first worldwide in sexual abuse, physical abuse and the murder of children under the age of 14.

## Laboratory of Digital Citizenship Project

This project is an initiative of the *Cultural Center of Spain* in Mexico, *Foundation Telefonica of Mexico* and

*According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in 2014 Mexico ranked first worldwide in sexual abuse, physical abuse and the murder of children under the age of 14.*

the *Spanish Ateneo of Mexico*, which aims to create a platform for training in arts, culture and science through the use of Information Technology and Communication (ICT). The *Laboratory Digital Citizenship* operates in several locations in Mexico City, like the Net of FAROS (*Factories of Arts and Crafts*) of Mexico City. This workshop was carried out in the FARO Milpa Alta, located to the southeast of Mexico City. It was selected during the 2015 call (in April) from the *Laboratory of Digital Citizenship*, in accordance with the objectives of the project.<sup>1</sup>

I chose *Producing and Building my Citizenship* as the name of the workshop because it reflects the dual objective of producing media as well as exposing inequality and gender violence. As mentioned in the summary at the beginning of this article, the preliminary results of my thesis led me to reconsider the theoretical basis of the workshop, resulting in “women’s empowerment” as my central research concept.

Psychologist Nelly Stromquist defines women’s empowerment as “a process to change the distribution of power, both in interpersonal relations and institutions” (Stromquist, 1997, p. 78). She identifies four basic components of women’s empowerment: cognitive, psychological, economic and political:

- a) Cognitive component: “refers to the understanding that women have over their conditions of subordination and the causes of this in the micro and macro levels of society” (Stromquist, 1997: 80).
- b) Psychological component: “includes the development of feelings that women can implement a personal and social level to improve their condition, as well as the emphasis on the belief that they

can succeed in their efforts to change” (Stromquist, 1997: 80-81).

- c) Economic component: “requires that women have the ability to engage in a productive activity that will provide some degree of financial autonomy, no matter how small the beginning, and how difficult it is to reach” (Stromquist, 1997: 81).
- d) Political component: “involves the ability to analyze the surrounding environment in political and social terms; this also means the ability to organize and mobilize social change. Consequently, a process of empowerment must involve individual consciousness and collective action, which is essential for the purpose of achieving social change” (Stromquist, 1997: 82).

My workshop, “Building and producing my citizenship”, was focused on the cognitive and political components, attempting to reveal the factors that activate, legitimize, and engender violence against women and girls. Based on Stromquist’s political component (above), during the workshop we reflected on how humans beings can progress from an initial change in consciousness of social relations to a powerful mobilization that challenges the stability of an entire social structure.

It is worth remembering that the sociologist Anthony Giddens (2001) refers to agency as the ability of the actors or subjects to transform social relations that structure a society at a social, cultural, political, historical and economic level. That is, citizens can self-monitor and understand themselves and their social world, which allows them to rationalize what they are doing; they not only possess the intention to do something, but the ability to do it. So, in this sense, women’s empowerment is an obvious and valuable goal in the promotion of social agency.

### **Media Education with a feminist gender perspective (MEFGP)**

In my doctoral research I have proposed the following definition of Media Education with a feminist gender perspective (MEFGP):

*A number of processes, internal and external, individual and collective, that will promote the understanding of the role of media as an ideological extension of the patriarchal system. Through these processes, the participants will learn to analyze media discourse and identify gender stereotypes, biases of sexism, and misogyny. Also, participants will have the chance to become active producers of content free of gender bias, that is, with a new and critical perspective on the roles and values of women and men. In addition, Media Education with a feminist gender perspective can motivate the participants to generate projects that promote the empowerment of women and girls.*

It is noteworthy that MEFGP can promote active and critical participation based on the understanding that inequality and gender violence result from historical, economic, political, social and cultural processes, *not* from the decisions and individual characteristics of people.

In addition, MEFGP might be able to restore women’s basic human rights, to coordinate actions within the legal framework of each region, and thus link with State representatives. Similarly, Divina Frau-Meigs (2011, p. 342) notes that Media Education and a model of human rights can be united in a process of mutual reinforcement. The tool of critical thinking



But, what is the relation amongst women’s empowerment, agency and MEFGP? The following table suggests the convergence amongst these three elements:

### Women’s Empowerment

Cognitive component:

Gender inequality has historical, social, cultural, political, economic backgrounds. It is not a natural process.

### Agency

Political component:

Along with recognizing the levels of individual and collective oppression, comes the commitment, ethical and political, to promote changes in the distribution of power. An empowerment process aims at the social transformation and assertion of the rights of historically excluded groups (in this case, women and girls). Empowerment does not seek only benefits on an individual level, but it involves the community, one of the most important keys of feminist action.

### MEFGP

We are capable of:

Analyzing the content of the mass media and, therefore, changing the symbolic representations of the social world.

Generating gender messages that are free of stereotypes, and that promote the rights of women and girls.

Being aware of the role of the mass media as institutions that reproduce content and messages that naturalize and reinforce gender inequality.

It is understood that gender inequality is not a natural process but has historical, social, cultural, political and economic roots, and therefore is reversible.

promoted by Media Education can be a way to create a free and informed citizenry, as well as providing an education in human rights. In addition, Media Education can help mainstream the rights of specific social groups: “Women can use international deals and declarations created by the United Nations to require Member States to take measures, such as the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW, 1979) or the *Beijing Platform for Action* (1995)” (Frau-Meigs, 2011, p. 108).

Let us not forget that agency is the ability to do something, possessing the knowledge and skills that can change the distribution of power. That’s why MEFGP must include the specific skills for executing concrete actions.

### The workshop experience

The workshop assumed that women’s access to a life free of violence is a human right, based on the existing legal framework in Mexico. I refer specifically to

the *General Law on Access of Women to a Life Free of Violence*, an instrument that defines and characterizes sexual harassment in two dimensions: in the community and school, and the workplace context. This law is based on international conventions of women’s human rights as signed by the Mexican State.

The methodology of the workshop consisted of discussion /reflection groups about violence against women. Media literacy education was also employed in the acquisition of photographic and image-editing skills. The workshop was attended by eight people - five women and three men between 16 and 25 years, for a total of 25 hours. The participants developed two video scripts which represented the following five topics:

- Sexual harassment takes place in both public and private spaces.
- Sexual harassment is a matter of public interest, which implies that all people must be involved in prevention, concern and complaint.

- There should be zero tolerance against this abuse of power.
- In most cases, the victims are women and girls.
- Sexual harassment is a crime.

Insofar as a process of theoretical and conceptual training takes time, in several stages, this workshop provided basic definitions of violence against women, which allowed participants to identify sexual harassment as an act of gender violence.

*Revealing oppression allows the agent to build alternatives, ie, to understand that there are possibilities for emancipation, that destiny is not and cannot be marked only by virtue of being part of an excluded and violated social group.*

It is noteworthy that two participants were able to identify personal experiences of gender violence, specifically sexual harassment by teachers and acts of control and jealousy by their former and current partners. This is poignant because before participating in the workshop, no one had had access to information about women's human rights and violence against women.

In this experience, MEFGP worked as a process in which people were able to represent an everyday situation through a critical and reflective lens that revealed abuses of power over subjects that have historically been portrayed as weak, i.e., women and girls. The workshop not only provided the participants with technological tools, but a new perspective, albeit unfinished, with the potential to promote other awarenesses, either as perpetrators or receptors of gender violence.

The fact that some of the participants were able to recognize violence against women also represents an example of agency, and this is translated into the ability to recognize themselves as subjects who are experiencing different levels of oppression due to their gender. Revealing oppression allows the agent to build alternatives, i.e., to understand that there are possibilities for emancipation, that destiny is not and cannot be marked only by virtue of being part of an excluded and violated social group. This example of agency positions women not just as victims but as agents capable of effecting significant power shifts.

### Conclusions: challenges and questions

While, as mentioned, access to information can provide tools to assess social, cultural, economic, political and historical phenomena, the great challenge of

MEFGP, and any proposal for Media Education, is to promote processes in which people position themselves as social agents.

In his theory of structuration, the English sociologist Anthony Giddens (2001) refers to agency as the ability to do something, that is, the practical awareness of the agents and their ability to transform social structure. I suggest that this definition prompts the following question: Can Media Education promote agency in people?

The proposed definition of MEFGP in my project was





“to generate a process of awareness, and to take basic action to transform societal structure.” But, if people do not read themselves as historical subjects configured by their gender, they cannot identify the oppressions that they experience. If we don’t make visible those political, social, cultural, economic and historically constructed oppressions, they will be reaffirmed.

MEFGP encourages women and men to understand that what happens in their lives not only happens to them, but has an origin in structural factors. My project, *Producing and building my citizenship*, revealed that sexual harassment is an exercise of domination that has limited the freedom and security of (mainly) women and girls, and is not caused by the clothing or behaviour of the victims, but by unequal power relations between women and men. This reflection can lead people to question the definitions of femininity and masculinity imposed by media institutions and the State itself, which not only include the media institutions framework, but political action as an exercise of citizenship.

Finally, this experience suggests that international organizations and international cooperation agencies, such as groups that promote the Laboratory of Digital Citizenship, can be very influential in developing media education experiences in informal spaces that can function as affirmative actions to complement the contents of formal educational institutions (which, at least in Mexico, means lack of human rights training). Nevertheless, access to education, despite being guaranteed in its Constitution, is still hampered by inequalities of gender, class, race and ethnicity in Mexico. ❀

## REFERENCES

- Comisión Ejecutiva de Atención a Víctimas (2016). *Resultados preliminares del Diagnóstico sobre la atención de la violencia sexual en México*. Available in: <http://www.ceav.gob.mx/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Resumen-Ejecutivo-diagnostico-violencia-Sexualcreditos2.pdf>
- Comisión Especial para la *Investigación del Femicidio* (2006). *Investigación sobre violencia feminicida en la República Mexicana*. México, LIX Legislatura de la Cámara de Diputados.
- Frau-Meigs, D. (2011). “Media matters in the cultural contradict of the “information society.”” Towards a human rights-based governance. Council of Europe Publishing.
- Ley General de Acceso de las Mujeres a una Vida Libre de Violencia* (General Law on Access of Women to a Life Free of Violence). Available in: [http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LGAMVLV\\_171215.pdf](http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LGAMVLV_171215.pdf)
- Giddens, A. (2001). *La constitución de la sociedad*. Bases para la teoría de la estructuración. Amorrortu editores, Buenos Aires, Argentina, segunda edición.
- Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (2011). *Femicidio en México. Aproximaciones, tendencias y cambios, 1985-2009*. México. Available in: <http://www.unifemweb.org.mx/documents/actividades/femicidios/libro.pdf>
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (2008). *Las mujeres en México. Estadísticas sobre igualdad de género y violencia contra las mujeres*. México.
- Juárez, J. (2012). *Desaparecidas en Ciudad Juárez*. Madrid, Ediciones Amargord.
- Stromquist, N. (1997). “La búsqueda del empoderamiento: en qué puede contribuir el campo de la educación.” In León, M. *Poder y empoderamiento de las mujeres*. TM Editores: Colombia.
- United Nations (2010). *Informe sobre los Objetivos del Milenio*. Available in: [http://www.un.org/spanish/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG\\_Report\\_2010\\_SP.pdf#page=](http://www.un.org/spanish/millenniumgoals/pdf/MDG_Report_2010_SP.pdf#page=)

## FOOTNOTE

- 1 To see more information about the project, go to web site: <http://ccemx.org/labciudadania/>

# Canadian Agents

by Neil Andersen



**Neil Andersen**, M. Ed., @mediasee, is president of *The Association for Media Literacy* (Ontario) and a board member, *Journal of Media Literacy*. He has taught primary to post-secondary media studies for over 30 years, including media studies additional qualifications courses for Mount Saint Vincent University, York University and the University of Toronto. He has given keynotes and workshops across Canada, in the US, Japan, India, China, Australia, England and Sweden.

He has made movies and videos, authored student textbooks, journal articles, teacher resource books, blog posts, over 200 study guides, and designed T-shirts, posters, interactive CDs, websites, and computer programs.

His awards include the Jessie McCauley Award (*National Telemedia Council*) and The Magic Lantern Award (*The Association for Media and Technology in Education*).

His writing includes “Media literacy’s gifts to literature study” in *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* ([edlinked.soe.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/etpc/files/2010v9n1nar1.pdf](http://edlinked.soe.waikato.ac.nz/research/files/etpc/files/2010v9n1nar1.pdf)), “Why Social Media Literacy?” (co-author) in *Forum Magazine* (<https://www.ossf.on.ca/~media/.../spring-2013-vol-39-issue-02.ashx?...>), “Media Literacy Education in Ontario” for *Media Literacy in Action* (Routledge), and “The Future of Media Literacy Education” (*Journal of Media Literacy*, Volume 62, #1&2)

---

[activism] [media environments] [Canadian media] [culture jamming] [branding]

Some media pundits enthuse that there has been a significant democratization as a result of digital media affordances. There are certainly new players. *PewDiePie* is a *YouTube* sensation earning millions of dollars a year from his videos. Netflix produces original content, with *Amazon*, *The Verge*, and *YouTube* joining it. Justin Bieber owes his career to his careful and strategic uses of social media and *Youtube*.

Others wonder if media environments are as oppressive as ever. They suggest that the proliferation of self-expression is certainly evidence of action but not necessarily agency. They suggest that posting blogs, photos and videos often just recapitulates hegemonic forces. In other words, what might appear as individualistic self-expression is activity that reaffirms pre-existing power structures and forms rather than challenging them (Buckingham, this issue).

Like David Buckingham, I prefer the *both/and* position to *either/or*, meaning that while people might work within established structures, they can still be agents of change. I believe that it is possible to exercise agency within established media structures that results in significant change and I submit proof in the form of several Canadian agents. I know or have met

many of these agents. They are smart, focused and use media effectively and deliberately. Their media literacy is strong.

**Marshall McLuhan**, the resurrected Canadian prophet of media studies, used media so effectively



that some suggest he sacrificed himself in the process. McLuhan could have been a brilliant but unknown literature professor, but his curiosity and insights into emerging electronic effects caught the 60s zeitgeist and he rode the cultural wave via provocative media studies. He seemed to have answers to the most compelling questions, and agreed to TV, magazine and radio interviews, a famous appearance in Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*, and a *Playboy* interview (widely circulated today as one of the most approachable encapsulations of his ideas). The primo TV show of the day, *Laugh-In*, (the 60s’ version of *Saturday Night Live*) asked, “Marshall McLuhan, What’re you doin?”

McLuhan used his appearances to provoke critical thinking about effects that many either couldn't perceive or understand. He wrote books and articles and established the McLuhan Program in Culture and Communications at the University of Toronto. As he was courted by pop culture celebrities and big businesses, he continued to pontificate on media effects, using clever and now-famous aphorisms to probe society's relationships to all media.

While he capitalized on his celebrity to advance his ideas beyond academia into the mainstream, he was attacked by a jealous and disdainful university culture that thought pop culture was profane and that his ideas lacked pedigree. He was famous abroad, but marginalized at home. The University of Toronto treated him like an embarrassment, shuttering his Centre. The Academy discredited his ideas. He died from a massive stroke in 1980, with little fanfare.

A small group of loyal students and friends (including The Association for Media Literacy's Barry Duncan) kept his ideas alive; and time, personal computers, the internet, smartphones and social media have emerged as manifestations of the very ideas he suffered for. With each new technological innovation, McLuhan's theories become more profound and useful in helping us understand ourselves in the evolving media ecosystem. Without his flirtations with pop culture, they might have faded.

**Naomi Klein** (@NaomiAKlein) spoke at an Association for Media Literacy Symposium just as *No Logo* (1999) hit the bestseller lists. It was the first of her string of powerful books, movies and speaking engagements in which she critiqued power structures, specifically capitalism. *This Changes Everything* (2014), examines capitalism's role in climate change and advocates that we drop everything and do what we can to mitigate coming climate-caused catastrophes.

Ms. Klein is no stranger to media literate agency. Her mother, Bonnie, directed several social-justice-themed movies at the *National Film Board of Canada*. Bonnie Klein's best-known film is *Not a Love Story* (1982), a documentary that explored pornography's negative effects on women's self-esteem and social status.

**Avi Lewis** (@avilewis) has had a long career in television, starting as a MuchMusic VJ. MuchMusic was Canada's version of MTV, but had a pioneering

journalism department and a wonderful community relationship. While he was only at MuchMusic for two years, Mr. Lewis was able to produce several critical examinations of music and pop culture.



Mr. Lewis is also no stranger to social justice issues. His grandfather, David, was the leader of Canada's New Democratic Party and advocated for social justice throughout his time in office. Mr. Lewis' father, Stephen, was the leader of Ontario's New Democratic Party during the same period, later Canada's ambassador to the United Nations, then the head of the *Stephen Lewis Foundation*, which advocates support for AIDS victims in Africa. Michelle Landsberg, Mr. Lewis' mother, is a long-time feminist and social justice advocate. Ms. Landsberg wrote and campaigned regularly against "sexual harassment in the workplace, racial discrimination in education and employment opportunities, and lack of gender equality in divorce and custodial legal proceedings." (Wikipedia)

Mr. Lewis has worked in social justice endeavours alone and with his wife, Naomi Klein. When Mr. Lewis was a VJ at Toronto's MuchMusic, Ms. Klein consulted on several of his media literate documentaries. One was *Smokes and Booze* (1997), a one-hour video exploring the tobacco and alcohol industries' sponsorship of popular music. The video deals with several key questions: Is it ethical for tobacco and alcohol producers to use teen-oriented music in the promotion of their products? Does such promotion result in increased teen consumption of tobacco and alcohol? Are artists 'selling out' their fans and themselves to tobacco and alcohol companies by associating their works and their brand with them? The video bears strong similarities to those he has more recently co-produced with Ms. Klein.

After MuchMusic, Mr. Lewis moved to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), where he was

involved in several TV shows, each of which stressed social justice and/or critical thinking. I appeared on an episode of *counterSpin*, which involved Mr. Lewis listening to pro and con arguments addressing a particular issue, then summarizing and explaining why he favoured one or the other position. Mr. Lewis provided great thinkaloud modeling of critical thinking.

Mr. Lewis then moved to *Al-Jazeera*, where he hosted *Faultlines*, a news documentary show that explored social issues such as the Detroit Auto industry collapse, South American debt, oil spills and the Tea Party's ideology.

Most recently, he directed *This Changes Everything* (2015), a film that complements Naomi Klein's book of the same name. Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis continuously advocate for social justice online, in print, in video and in personal appearances at social justice and climate change related conferences. Both provide strong examples of working within structures (TV, publishing, public speaking, movies) to push for change. They personify both/and agency in action.

**Jesse Brown** (@JesseBrown) had apprenticed at CBC radio, but I became a fan when he launched *Canadaland* ([canadalandshow.com/](http://canadalandshow.com/)), a listener-supported



podcast. *Canadaland* has taken an unflinching look at corruption, government interference and weak or compromised reporting in the rapidly-evolving journalism industry. *Canadaland* is not just fearless when searching for truth, but has invited its fiercest critics to be guests, listened to their criticisms, and sometimes modified its actions as a result.

It has also suffered the disaffection of fellow journalists, businesses, legislators and news organizations that comes with honest and transparent reporting.

Mr. Brown has often modeled excellent critical thinking and media literacy. He asks strong questions and follows them up for in-depth exploration. But most importantly—and timely—he has modeled measured, respectful and articulate argumentation. If there is a lost or endangered skill in public discourse in the 21st century, it is the ability to dialogue respectfully, effectively and extendedly with someone espousing an oppositional ideology. Mr. Brown does that often and brilliantly. He has often conversed with

guests holding oppositional ideological positions with respect and candor, but with no submissiveness or condescension. His most contentious conversations should be case studies in positive dialogue for students of journalism, public policy, law and political science. *Canadaland* represents the kind of radio that the CBC, which has lost its way if not its nerve, could and should be.

**Jesse Hirsh** (@jessehirsh) is a self-acclaimed public intellectual and a critical thinker at large. He appears weekly as a technology reporter on CBC radio, has given *TED Talks* and many keynotes. I met Jesse over 20 years ago when he was a member of the *Media Collective*, a group of activists who maintained a loose affiliation with one another to use media to affect social change. Jesse studied at the



University of Toronto's *McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology*.

Jesse is best known as a tech commentator and futurist, but his real passion is civic engagement and the ways in which new technologies are influencing political discourse and human relationships. He uses his media and live appearances to encourage people to think very carefully and critically about their tech uses, a direct connection back to the work of Marshall McLuhan.

Jesse has made a very deliberate media literate choice in his presentations. He studied the professional speaker landscape and decided that the rarest of forms in a screen-dominated culture is the live speech. He offers precisely that to his clients, speaking without the usual projected slides and even without notes. Audiences experience him live, spontaneous and modeling critical media literacy thinking. They get his full eye contact and attention and don't have to read or view any slides. Just Jesse; a compelling and unusual—possibly unique—media experience. His format choice puts pressure on Jesse because he has no 'audiovisual aids' to occupy audience attention or time, but his delivery is cogent, coherent and compelling.

One of Jesse's greatest strengths is his disarming affability. He always seems to be in a positive mood,

celebrating the careful skepticism that he encourages people to share. His demeanor is interpersonal (the oldest medium), yet it translates well to his radio and video representations. Again, agency within structures.

Jesse created his own structure in addition to working within existing structures. He established *The Academy of the Impossible* (impossible.ws) in a Toronto storefront as a think tank and laboratory to develop and encourage community involvement and innovation in public policy. *The Academy of the Impossible* — ‘impossible’ was very deliberately chosen — offered free or low-cost courses to support social action, personal development and self-awareness. Jesse also hosted a variety of evening discussions relevant to social change. *The Academy* was supported by donors. It ran effectively for a few years, then faltered. Jesse closed the bricks and mortar *Academy*, but its spirit lives on in pop-up fashion as needed.

**Cory Doctorow** (@doctorow) is a writer, speaker, blogger and activist. He has spent much of his career working with the *Electronic Frontier Foundation* and has travelled extensively promoting his books. Cory was born and raised in Toronto, but has spent much of his adult life in London and Los Angeles.

He has focused on writing Young Adult fiction, yet his novels are appropriate and compelling for adults. I want Cory’s novels to be featured on high school English curricula because they are appropriate

for high school readers and entirely worthy of literary study. In support of that wish, I created a popular signifier of scholastic validity for Cory’s bestseller *Homeland*: a study guide (aml.ca/homeland-study-guide/).

Cory’s prequel to *Homeland*, *Little Brother*, has been optioned for a feature movie, so will have to have its own study guide addressing the novel and movie versions of the story.

Cory’s writings address near-future social justice issues. His heroes are teens or young adults,

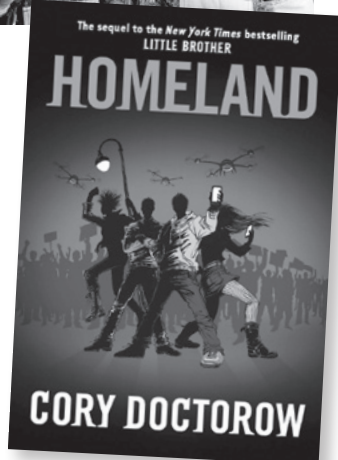
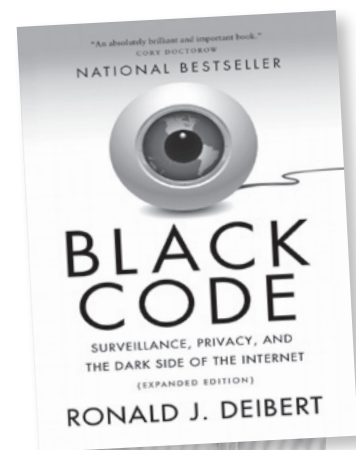
and easy to identify with. It is easy to see his fiction as polemical because his heroes explain their positions on oppression, repression and human rights in direct address. (*Pride and Prejudice* and *Macbeth* are polemics for the same reasons.) The stories are compelling, well-crafted, quirky and funny. While *Homeland* and *Little Brother* are his best-known novels, my favourite is *For the Win* for at least two reasons. First, the novel is excellently crafted, weaving multiple story lines occurring in China, South Asia and America culminating in a powerful conclusion. Second, the novel explores the socio-politics of the sweatshop experience in the clothing, art and gaming industries.

Cory has also written a large body of non-fiction, and his essays and books advocate for egalitarian ideals in online environments. Many of his essays are also worthy of classroom study.

In his other lives, Cory is a co-editor of *Boing Boing* (boing-boing.net) and a Fellow of the *Electronic Frontier Foundation*. In both cases, his activism and agency promote free speech, privacy and sharing. Putting his money where his mouth is ideologically, Cory sells his novels as paper and e-books and offers downloads free of charge on his website. He is a big fan of independent bookstores, making personal appearances at them and promoting them in his e-books’ chapter interstitials.

Who’s watching the watchers? **Ron Deibert** (@RonDeibert), the Director of the *Citizen Lab at the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto*. Ron’s group surreptitiously invades the networks of oppressive governments, cyber-saboteurs and industrial spies, then watches as they work. When they have gathered comprehensive evidence, the *Citizen Lab* publishes their findings, outing the black hats.

Ron is especially concerned about human rights violations, both on and offline. He was a principal creator of *Psyphon*, a cloaking app that allowed dissidents to communicate online without detection. He constantly warns us of security risks through his lectures,



tweets, books, articles and blog posts. The *Citizen Lab* not only identified a significant IOS exploit but also provides a kit for those who want to request their data from their ISPs. Agency within structures.

**Dave Meslin** (@meslin) was another member of the *Media Collective*. When I first met him he was protesting unsightly billboard ads by splattering them with paint.

Dave has an unflagging commitment to civic duty and pride, and has been involved in 16 different civic projects in as many years. These have ranged from

organizing community events to co-founding *Spacing Magazine* ([spacing.ca/](http://spacing.ca/)) to trying to change the ways that municipal politicians are elected. Dave is a public speaker and has presented a *TED Talk* on the systemic causes of apathy ([ted.com/speakers/dave\\_meslin](http://ted.com/speakers/dave_meslin)).

Again, a set of wide-ranging acts of agency, all aimed at improving citizenship, within structures.

I first met **Steph Guthrie** (@amirightfolks) when she interviewed me for her Master's thesis. She wanted to know more about media literacy. We met again when we took a course together from Jesse Hirsh. Steph has since sought social justice influence, specifically

in the treatment of women in virtual environments. This is a sorely-needed goal, as women are historically abused online. She is now a free-lance gender-equity consultant ([stephguthrie.com/](http://stephguthrie.com/)).

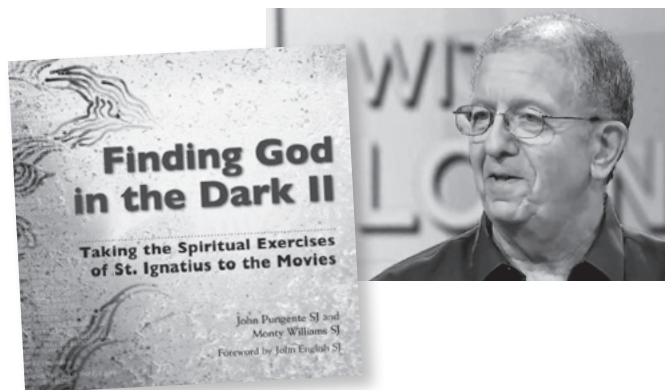
Steph took a stalker to court for harassment. She lost the case because the judge was not convinced that she felt physically threatened by the defendant's Tweets. Win or lose, the case put the issue of online sexual harassment on the public agenda. ([huffingtonpost.ca/2016/01/22/steph-guthrie-twitter-harassment-bullies\\_n\\_9055828.html](http://huffingtonpost.ca/2016/01/22/steph-guthrie-twitter-harassment-bullies_n_9055828.html)) Since the case, Steph has received online abuse that more than validates her concerns about women's online experiences and done a *TED Talk* about her court experience, again placing sexual harassment into the public agenda, where it needs to remain until stalking and trolling of women—online and offline—cease.

Steph used her agency in the *TED Talk* to suggest a list of ways that others might exercise agency online. Again, agency within structures, this time advocating and describing additional agency within structures.

**David Suzuki** (@David-Suzuki) has practiced media agency for decades. He has produced and/or appeared on numerous television and radio programs, written books, spoken publicly, established a foundation, and even appeared in advertising promoting energy-efficient light bulbs. Agency within structures. "Suzuki's aim is to stimulate interest in the natural world, to point out threats to human well-being and wildlife habitat, and to present alternatives to humanity for achieving a more sustainable society." (Wikipedia.org)

Since 1970, Suzuki's consistent goal has been to help people understand and appreciate the transactional roles between humans and the environment so that they might behave more responsibly. He uses his voice effectively, employing a careful balance between easygoing and vociferous. He makes his cases straightforwardly, without overstatements or whining, but leaving no doubt about the need for better global stewardship.

John PungenteSJ is a paragon of tireless agency. An enthusiastic high school film studies teacher, then principal, he became Manitoba's Head of Film Classification. He formed the *Jesuit Communications Project* after a year's sabbatical studying media literacy education around the world. When I say 'around the world,' I mean it literally. John spent a year travelling and visiting media literacy educators in their classrooms. This was an especially-harrowing sacrifice for John because he does not like to fly, and some of his landing and take-off experiences were literally death-defying.



John distilled his sabbatical learning into *Getting Started in Media Education*, a book that provided a recipe for implementing successful media literacy education. He then followed his book's own guidelines and resettled from Winnipeg to Toronto, where he strategically liaised with *The Association for Media Literacy* because he thought this organization was the likeliest to succeed. John exposed us to important books and educators, many of whom we invited to Toronto to share their knowledge and experiences, each of which was life-changing.

John also contributed to Ontario's *Media Literacy Resource Guide* and taught media education strategies to teachers through Faculties of Education and libraries. He liaised with *CHUM Television*, an innovative maverick organization with a strong social justice ethic. *CHUM* became a regular supporter of AML activities and, later, a producer/distributor of John's monthly *Scanning the Movies* show. This show advanced media literacy learning by exploring the themes and qualities of first-run feature movies for 11 seasons. John included me as a writer on the show scripts and the study guides that were produced for each movie.

Also in collaboration with *CHUM* and Vancouver's *Face-to-Face Media*, John produced *Scanning Television*, a large video compendium with Kathleen Tyner and I writing the teachers' guide. *Scanning Television* became a best-selling resource, modeling media literacy education for teachers across North America, then in Japan when he negotiated a Japanese translation of the guide.

At intervals between these projects, John wrote two more books: *More Than Meets the Eye: Watching Television Watching Us* to encourage people to be more aware viewers; and *Finding God in the Dark* to support Catholics who wanted to deepen their faith through reflective movie viewing.

During these activities, John received two honorary doctorate degrees and used his commencement speeches to advocate for more media literacy agency.

John's agency continues as he runs the Jesuit Communications Project and teaches media studies at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto.

Significantly, these agents started—but almost none completed—post-secondary education. They were either too impatient to begin their activism or were unconvinced that academic qualifications would

be an asset to their agency. This is telling news for universities: change agents do not need academic qualifications to be effective; in fact, academic studies might drain energy and skills that make them effective agents. It is certainly true that academic environments encourage esoteric/arcane language and concepts that might be buzzkill for popular audiences, so that agents who wish to engage the largest possible audience and have the largest possible influence find academia constricting. These Canadian agents' messages are populist, using social media and live appearances as well as video, interviews, books and editorials to exercise their agency. Agency within a variety of structures.

Their agency has also been risky. Many of them have suffered attacks, personal and professional, because their ideas and agency are provocative and discomfort audiences.

*The Journal of Media Literacy* is itself an example

*We are experiencing the most rapid social changes ever recorded, largely as a result of rapid technological innovations. It is understandable that some people are bewildered, discouraged—even threatened—by some of those changes.*

of this populist decision. Its editorial board has deliberately decided to avoid the refereed-paper condition applied by other media literacy journals because it wants to be inclusive of both writers and audiences. The JML wants everyone to be as media literate as possible, to apply critical media literacy skills that will maximize their and their society's health. This has been its goal for over 60 years.

We are experiencing the most rapid social changes ever recorded, largely as a result of rapid technological innovations. It is understandable that some people are bewildered, discouraged—even threatened—by some of those changes. Some believe that the new environments and affordances offer greater opportunities for influencing those changes while others believe we are oppressed. Both are true, but there is yet room for negotiation. At least 11 Canadian agents (12 if I include Barry Duncan, referenced elsewhere) have surveyed the media landscape and found ways that they can exert influence and enjoy self-expression, both within and beyond structures. ❖

# End User License Agreements in Plain Language

By Neil Andersen

---

[end user license agreement] [internet privacy]

## Agency is knowledge in action.

**F**or most of us, End User License Agreements (EULAs) provoke conflicted responses. On one hand, we appreciate that media companies must protect themselves to stay in business. On the other hand, we know that most media companies collect and sell records of our online activities—with our permission but without any compensation. Each user's activities are monetized to the extent that many media companies are valued in the billions, yet almost no money flows to any user. As one pundit told me, "I hate Facebook, but I have to use it because everyone is on it."

So when faced with the 'agree' button on a sign-up page, we often have an unpleasant 'I-feel-so-cheap' feeling, knowing that we are surrendering most of our online privacy and right to protest to exercise the utility of online activities. We don't really know if such surrender is worth it, but we hope so.

All apps and services have EULAs. A few are written in concise, friendly language delivered in well-organized categories. Most, however, run several pages in arcane legal language. Sometimes, users must re-agree every time a new update releases. Small wonder that even those of us who endeavor to read the EULAs give up and mindlessly click the 'agree' button.

The Association for Media Literacy believes that people cannot be too media literate, and that some of that media literacy includes understanding and avoiding the risks of using electric communications. The AML wants everyone to benefit the most from media uses—personally, educationally, civically—while risking the least. The AML knows that people are compelled, for a variety of reasons, to use electric media; that they will use them even though they know there are risks; and that they will not read the EULAs and

therefore know their risks. Knowing our risks, however, will help us behave ethically and safely, as well as know when our rights have been violated.

In support of understanding and appreciating the risks of electric communications, The AML has worked with two sets of students to produce an ongoing series of EULAs in Plain Language. The AML wants to provide these guides to anyone who wants to know and avoid the risks of using electric media.

Our first step was to identify the most-used media apps or services. The second was to ask volunteer law students (Pro-Bono Students of Canada) to identify EULA passages that put users at risk, then translate these passages into plain language. The passages were then re-written in Q&A formats. The Q&As were designed as posters by graphic arts students at Toronto's Wexford Collegiate School for the Arts.

Seven posters (see samples below) are now ready for distribution ([www.aml.ca](http://www.aml.ca)), with more to come. The AML hopes that the posters will travel far and wide, sparking conversations and behaviours that will raise users' awareness and agency in their uses of electric communications. ✱



# Facebook™ EULA Highlights



## Who can have a Facebook account?

You cannot use Facebook if you are under 13 or a convicted sex offender.  
You can only have one personal account. The personal and contact information must be accurate and up-to-date.  
You cannot claim to be another person, create an account for a fake organization, or create multiple accounts.  
You cannot create an account for anyone else or transfer your account to anyone without permission.  
You must use a Facebook Page for mainly money-making purposes, not your personal timeline.  
You cannot do anything that may risk the security of your account, such as sharing your password or letting other people access your account.  
Facebook has the right to remove your username.  
If Facebook disables your account, you must get permission to create another one.

## Does Facebook ban or remove content?

Facebook removes content when there is a risk of physical harm or a direct threat to public safety.  
Groups linked to terrorism or violent criminal activity are not allowed.  
Facebook also forbids actions that could result in financial harm to others, including theft and vandalism.  
Facebook removes any encouragement of self-mutilation, eating disorders or hard drug abuse. Facebook also provides assistance for users in distress.

## Does Facebook ban bullying, hate, porn or inappropriate graphics?

Facebook users may not  
bully or harass,  
attack others based on race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or medical condition,  
Share graphic content for sadistic pleasure,  
Share pornographic content and any explicitly sexual contact involving children and teens,  
Display nudity, excepting for some artistic and personal uses,  
Publish personal information about others without their consent.

## Does Facebook ban copyright violations?

Facebook users must respect copyrights, trademarks and other legal rights.

## Does Facebook protect users' privacy?

Facebook asks users not to contact other users for commercial purposes without their consent.

## What can I do if I don't want to be tagged?

Anyone can tag you in anything. If you do not want someone to tag you, contact them personally or block them.

You can choose whether a story you have been tagged in appears on your timeline. If you are tagged, you and your friends will be able to see it and it will appear on News Feed or in Search. You can also remove a tagged story from your timeline.

## What if someone is offended, slandered, or dissed on Facebook?

Facebook is not responsible for the conduct of any user, offensive, inappropriate, illegal or objectionable content or information.  
If a lawsuit is brought against Facebook related to your actions, content or information, you will repay Facebook for all expenses.  
Anyone can add a link to a story. If a person links to another person's timeline, they will only see what they are allowed to see.

Designed by: Karah Fountain  
Wexford Collegiate School for the Arts



The Association for Media Literacy ([www.aml.ca](http://www.aml.ca)) makes no representation as to the currency of this translation nor its fitness for use. The translation is not updated concurrently with the EULA it purports to explain and is not regularly maintained.

This translation is intended for use by educators and is not meant to be relied upon for currency or accuracy, nor is it to be considered legal advice under any circumstances.

In the event that you have questions about this EULA as it pertains to your individual circumstances, we recommend you seek legal advice.



# Instagram™

## EULA Highlights

### What control do I have of my information?

You can delete your account at any time for any reason. All of your content will be removed unless other users have re-shared it, e.g., outside of Instagram.

Instagram will hold no liability for lost content.

### What are the rules for using Instagram?

You must be at least 13, keep your login credentials secure and be responsible your account activity.

### What if my content violates copyright laws?

You are responsible for the legal and financial consequences of any violation. You will not hold Instagram liable.

### You may not:

- \* participate in threatening or suggestive activity
- \* use the service for an illegal purpose
- \* change or adapt Instagram's service
- \* imply association with Instagram on another website
- \* post private or confidential information
- \* attempt to restrict someone from accessing Instagram
- \* post violent, nude, partially nude, discriminatory, unlawful, infringing, hateful, pornographic or sexually suggestive content
- \* defame, stalk, bully, abuse, harass, threaten, impersonate or intimidate persons or things
- \* create accounts using automated devices, scripts, bots, spiders, crawlers, or scrapers
- \* create or submit spam
- \* use domain names or URLs in your username without consent
- \* interfere with or disrupt servers or networks connected to Instagram (e.g., transmitting viruses, malware, etc.)

### How can Instagram use my content?

Instagram can use your photos without compensation. Instagram will not rent or sell your content without your consent, except to Instagram partners or affiliates, who will also honour your privacy settings.

Instagram may remove identifying parts of your content to anonymize it.

### What if I share my info with others?

Instagram holds no responsibility for your content if you connect your account to a third-party service or site (e.g., Facebook). You also consent to your profile information being shared. You cannot hold Instagram responsible for anything another user or company does with your content.

### What if I disagree with something or wish to bring a claim?

Instagram is, under no circumstances, liable for any loss or damage of any kind. Instagram's liability is limited to US \$100.

You agree to compensate Instagram and third parties against any claims, losses or damages that arise from your conduct. You cannot settle any Instagram-related claim (i.e. between you and another user) without Instagram's prior written consent.

You unconditionally agree to solve disputes with Instagram outside of court through individual arbitration under the American Arbitration Association's rules.

You waive your right to participate in a class action lawsuit or class-wide arbitration against Instagram unless you opt out of the arbitration clause by sending your name, address, the email address you used to sign up for your account and a clear statement that you want to opt out of the arbitration agreement—within 30 days of clicking "I agree"—to:

Instagram, LLC  
ATTN: Arbitration Opt-Out  
1601 Willow Rd.  
Menlo Park, CA 94025

The Association for Media Literacy ([www.aml.ca](http://www.aml.ca)) makes no representation as to the currency of this translation nor its fitness for use. The translation is not updated concurrently with the EULA it purports to explain and is not regularly maintained. This translation is intended for use by educators and is not meant to be relied upon for currency or accuracy, nor is it to be considered legal advice under any circumstances. In the event that you have questions about this EULA as it pertains to your individual circumstances, we recommend you seek legal advice.



# TWITTER EULA HIGHLIGHTS



TWEETS  
2.5K

FOLLOWING  
85264

FOLLOWERS  
2.5M

LIKES  
192

Follow

## What rules govern my use of Twitter?

You must follow Twitter's Terms of Use as well as all local, state, national and international laws, rules and regulations. You are responsible for all use of Twitter Services. Anything you post can be viewed by other users as well as through other websites and services. You are responsible for any activities or actions and keeping your password safe.



## What can I do if someone copies my content?

Provide Twitter with: (i) a physical or electronic signature of the copyright owner; (ii) identification of the copyrighted work; (iii) identification of the violated work and its location; (iv) your address, telephone number, and email address; (v) a statement that the use is not authorized by the copyright owner; and (vi) that the information you provided is accurate, and that you are authorized to act on behalf of the copyright owner. Twitter reserves the right to remove content alleged to be violating copyright without notice. Twitter will terminate a user's account if the user is a repeat violator.



## How can I take Twitter to court?

Any trial will be governed by the laws of California and brought in San Francisco courts.



## How can I lose my Twitter account?

Twitter may suspend your account at any time for any reason, including if Twitter reasonably believes: (i) you have violated Twitter Rules, (ii) you create legal risk for Twitter, (iii) Twitter's services to you are no longer commercially viable.



## What can Twitter do with my content?

Twitter may remove or refuse to distribute your content and may suspend or terminate your account. Twitter can access, read, save, and disclose any information. Your content can be transferred to the United States or other countries. Twitter can share your content with other companies, organizations or individuals. Twitter can use your content throughout the world cost-free. You are responsible for anything you Tweet and for any consequences, including the use of your content by others.



## How can I quit Twitter?

Deactivate your account and discontinue your use. After a lengthy period of time of no use, Twitter may deactivate your account.



## What is Twitter's liability?

Twitter is not responsible for any loss or damages resulting from (i) your access or inability to access Twitter; (ii) any conduct or content from a third party on Twitter; (iii) content obtained from Twitter; or (iv) unauthorized access, use or alteration of your content. Twitter does not guarantee the truth, accuracy or reliability of any content. Twitter will not be responsible for any offensive, harmful, inaccurate or inappropriate content or loss or damage suffered. Twitter's liability will never exceed US \$100 or the amount you paid Twitter, if any, in the past 6 months.



## What happens when the EULA changes?

You agree to be bound by EULA changes by continuing to use Twitter.



The Association for Media Literacy ([www.aml.ca](http://www.aml.ca)) makes no representation as to the currency of this translation nor its fitness for use. The translation is not updated concurrently with the EULA it purports to explain and is not regularly maintained. This translation is intended for use by educators and and is not meant to be relied upon for currency or accuracy, nor is it to be considered legal advice under any circumstances. In the event that you have questions about this EULA as it pertains to your individual circumstances, we recommend you seek legal advice.



© Cora Fu 2016

# Barry Duncan: A Radical Agent for Media Literacy Education

By Carol Arcus



**Carol Arcus** is retired from a twenty-year career of teaching secondary school media studies as well as Additional Qualifications courses in Media Education for the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE). She has published articles in the *Journal for Media Literacy* and given many workshops on how to integrate media literacy into curriculum. Carol is the Vice President of The Association for Media Literacy, a volunteer organization that wrote the media component of the Ontario curriculum and advocates for media literacy.

---

[Barry Duncan] [AML] [Freire] [agency] [McLuhan] [City as Classroom]

*“[T]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.”*

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

In the 1970s, Barry Duncan—radical, mentor, and former student of Marshall McLuhan—understood better than anyone that until Ontario curriculum included media education, it would continue to offer learners nothing about their contem-

*As a mentor of young teachers and a classroom teacher himself, Barry modeled teaching as a kind of personal action research project in which agency is mobilized by both teacher-practitioner and student, and where students become colleagues in learning.*

porary electronic environment, leaving them without the necessary skills to navigate that environment critically. He fought for media literacy as a liberation agenda—the liberation of young minds from a

cultural, corporate, and technological onslaught. If you find this statement overly “protectionist,” bear in mind that when that electric environmental shift was happening, education was far less aware of the repercussions, if it was aware of a shift at all. The classroom needed to be challenging assumptions about attentionality, media messages, and industry in order to be freed from the perils of an ignorant curriculum. It wasn’t and Barry worked tirelessly for forty years to see that it did.

When he was generating support in 1978 for media curriculum and an activist media literacy education organization (later Ontario’s Association for Media Literacy), Barry also understood more about the true meaning of *agency* than most educators. As an agent acting on behalf of teachers and students, Barry embodied Paulo Freire’s idea of the radical who sees him/herself not as a liberator but one who persuades others that they already possess the power to liberate themselves and others in turn. Once they feel and know it, they activate change for themselves. As my colleague Neil Andersen has described it, Barry tapped into energies.

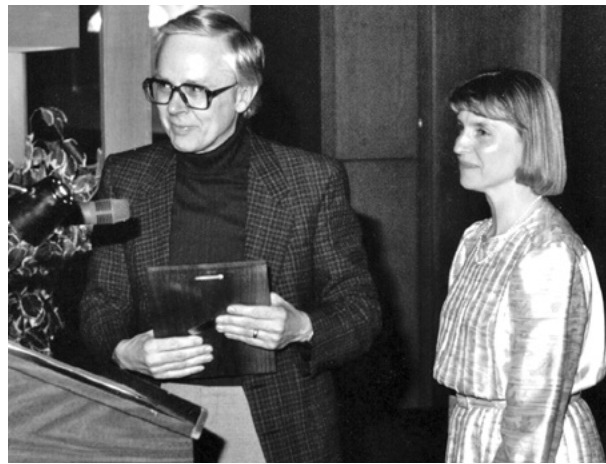
*“The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves.”*

—Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*

When I made the midlife decision to embark on a career in education, I picked up the threads of a decades-old interest in Marshall McLuhan and found my way very quickly to Barry Duncan. I remember eagerly standing in line to speak with him on the first day of a summer Additional Qualifications teacher course at the School of Experiential Education in Etobicoke, Ontario. I wanted to know if I could observe and volunteer in his fall semester classroom if I did not have a job by then. He was very enthusiastic, and I was humbled and nervous. As it turned out, I did get a temporary position, but in retrospect I might have learned more by working with Barry that first year than by wrestling 14 year olds in a portable classroom north of Toronto. Barry invited me to serve on the Executive of the AML in 1993. During the years until his death in 2012, he pushed me tirelessly to move beyond the insidious Ministry restrictions on teacher creativity that subordinated teachers' and learners' best talents to the official curriculum. He helped me to understand and develop my best strengths as a teacher. He offered me countless opportunities to try, fail, and build and reflect on my experience. In fact—and I did not recognize this at the time—he was modeling best practice through agency.

*“Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators.”*  
—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

As a mentor of young teachers and a classroom teacher himself, Barry modeled teaching as a kind of personal action research project in which agency is mobilized by both teacher-practitioner and student, and where students become colleagues in learning. This mutual community of practice confers a powerful agency on both. Educational institutions suppress



Barry—the first international recipient —accepts the Jessie McCaense award from NTC president Dr. Marti Tomas Izral



The AML Executive Board (l-r) Carol Arcus, John Pungente, Neil Andersen, Maureen Baron, Barry Duncan, Carolyn Wilson

the best talents of teachers by imposing strict curriculum expectations, discouraging free agency. A mutual community of practice amongst teachers and students does the opposite: it nurtures passion for learning, thus allowing all to move freely within the structure – and

*Media literacy is a literacy of agency, affording agency through the process of critical inquiry, application, and reflection.*

indeed to provoke it into becoming a more transparent system, freeing for both student and teacher. Barry's home turf, the School of Experiential Education, is a school designed expressly for students who are challenged by a mainstream environment. Its mandate is

“to value and foster the development of [among other traits] self-discovery; self-reliance; maturity; self-governance; self-expression; and collaboration.” In this type of system, transparency is key. Through open dialogue and lively discussion, the generation of independent student inquiry (action research) develops passionate learners/students: passion generates passion. Teacher agency begets student agency.

*“Liberation is a praxis : the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.” —Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Ministry documents are built around what someone thinks is best practice. A sense of agency allows teachers to ask what best practice can do for themselves and their students. It is a form of liberation in which teacher and student move away from a constrained, stratified system toward an organic, recursive ecosystem of learning. The teacher moves beyond rote teaching and learning within their institution—a necessary step in the evolution of the teacher and the system as a whole. The effect is an outward radiation across the institution toward permanent change. So the system gains its own agency: it works to confer agency upon its active members. In other words, agency works recursively.

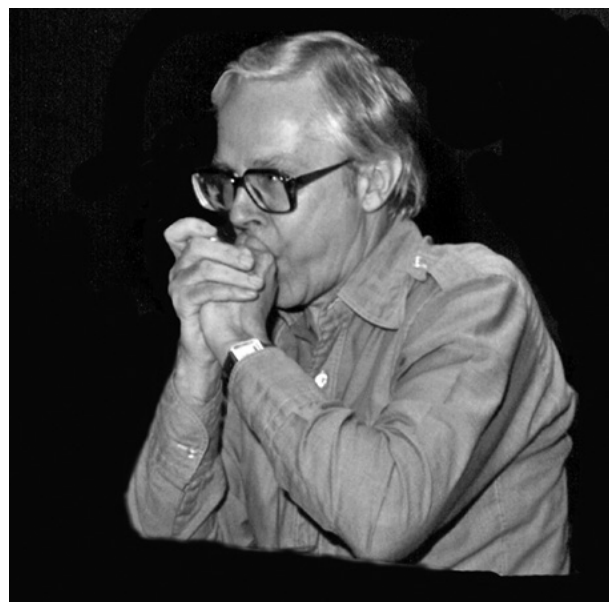
Barry Duncan knew that the trick for an educator is to understand her own range of agency and its possibilities before influencing her students’ understanding of their own potential. This is the hallmark of an effective teacher: not to improve on what is weak, but to strengthen what already forms the foundation of a passion. To nourish the seed of curiosity. Agency is conferred in the act of encouragement; in the act of opening doors you say, ‘Why not do this?’ It is conferred through conversation designed to prod more of what is being done well—out of a natural tendency. It is a tentative moving through possibilities. This is not just telling someone they can do better and giving them the tools to do so, but enabling endemic change within the whole system by seeding agency through both teachers and learners.

Barry gave me permission to grow through the personal action project which was my daily classroom for twenty years, rather than sticking to what I had

been taught. So I was mentored through the encouragement of the expression of my best self, without rancor, without criticism of what might be better; rather, in support of what I did best. Through this experience, I learned how to teach from my best self. It started with me and my students, not with the institution. He was the most radical person I have known.

He was an activist in the purest sense, conferring agency on and through the creation of The Association for Media Literacy and the support of media teachers in his AQ courses. He took overseas visitors into our classrooms, knowing that it is not enough to talk about what we do, but to show it. He liaised with as many organizations as possible, including making extensive international connections. In AML, he challenged our right to agency and tapped our energies through tireless prodding questions designed to motivate our awareness of social justice and self-advocacy.

I have neither taught nor used the word “agency” in my teaching and advocacy career, and yet it has probably been its single most consistent theme. And agency was what Barry was all about. Media literacy is a literacy of agency, affording agency through the process of critical inquiry, application, and reflection. As media literacy educators, the nurturing of agency is our mandate. It fulfills McLuhan’s notion of enabling citizens to become active social participants, empowered agents within their own media environments. ✨



Barry closes a conference with his signature loon call

**NATIONAL TELEMEDIA COUNCIL, INC.**

**1922 University Avenue  
Madison, Wisconsin 53726**

Non Profit Org  
US Postage  
**PAID**  
Madison, WI  
Permit #1645

*“This time, like all times, is a very good one,  
if we but know what to do with it.”*

*—Ralph Waldo Emerson*