

## CRITICAL INSIGHTS IN EUROPEAN MEDIA LITERACY RESEARCH AND POLICY

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COST is an intergovernmental framework for European Cooperation in Science and Technology, enabling the coordination of nationally funded research at the European level. The Action “Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies” (2010-2014) coordinates research efforts into the key transformations of European audiences and identifies their complex interrelationships within the social, cultural and political dimension of European societies. A range of interconnected but distinct topics concerning audiences is being developed by four Working Groups: (1) New media genres, media literacy and trust in the media; (2) Audience interactivity and participation; (3) The role of media and ICT use for evolving social relationships; and (4) Audience transformations and social integration. As part of Working Group 1, the task force on “Media Literacy” examines conceptual, methodological and policy issues concerning audiences within the changing media and communication environment.

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## FRAMING MEDIA LITERACY

The term 'literacy' was developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe the ability to read and write as it spread among common people, distinguishing itself from the word 'literature' which was traditionally associated with high culture (Williams, 1976). Ever since, literacy and then specifically media literacy research has expanded from focusing on how readers and audiences interpret, critique and respond to the mass media to also examining user activities and interactions in the digital, networked era. Media literacy research today is highly multidisciplinary, drawing on insights from social studies of technology, information science and human-computer interaction, educational practice, media and communication research and audience studies. Among these different disciplinary perspectives, we see significant differences and even tensions regarding the conceptual framing of media literacy. These struggles over definition and evaluation of media literacy persist, as do the continued challenges of implementing media education initiatives in formal and informal settings, and of encompassing not only children and young people but also adults, especially marginalized individuals such as immigrants and the elderly. Recent developments in the media landscape, together with international collaborations in media literacy research, further broaden the range of multi- and interdisciplinary approaches to media literacy, linking together literacies based on computer/ICT skills and the capacities of critical understanding, creative expression, and political and civic participation (Celot and Tornero, 2010; Carlsson 2010; Frau-Meigs and Torrent, 2009; Lankshear and Knobel, 2008).

It may be that such developments are stretching the concept of media literacy too far. Media literacy is increasingly expected to integrate highly diverse competencies and skills, often under the single definition of the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts (Aufderheide, 1993). But is it helpful to draw diverse literacies associated with information, communication, evaluation, digital platforms and so forth into a single umbrella concept that emphasises the development of universal, platform-neutral, generalisable criteria by which to assess media adoption, interpretation and use? Or are distinctions among types of literacy, each with their different histories and contexts, best maintained? Is it even appropriate to conceive of media literacy primarily as an individual phenomenon – the skills available in consumers' heads, as it were. Or should it be conceived also on a societal level (as is the case for print literacy, where one may talk of a literate society)? Education is the most commonly-employed means of enabling media literacy, whichever way this question is answered; but the responsibility for those that do not learn all that is needed in a digital age is differently conceived depending on whether media literacy is considered an individual or a societal prerequisite.

Furthermore, beneath apparent agreement over its importance are some fundamental and unresolved debates over whether media literacy essentially concerns technical or instrumental skills in managing media or whether it also includes more abstract and ambitious competences regarding learning and knowledge creation, citizenship and human rights to information, inclusion and participation in society (e.g. Gutierrez and Tyner, 2012). This debate concerns not only the nature but also the purposes of media

literacy, as scholars, educators and policymakers all try to identify and promote the many ways in which literate media uses are important for citizens and consumers across different spheres of daily life, on both an individual and societal level (Ding, 2011; Livingstone et al., 2013). For example, is the purpose of media literacy to enable people to accommodate to the existing media landscape or to critique it – and even to critique the society that represents itself through media in particular ways?

This special issue of *Media Studies* turns to theoretical and empirical research for critical insights regarding future directions, with the emphasis on the European perspective and theoretical origins of the concept as well as making particular reference to European policy. As guest editors of this issue, we begin with some observations about the current state of media literacy research as well as its recurrent challenges. We suggest that, notwithstanding the recent explosion of interest in forms of media and digital or information literacies, building on a longer history of research and practical initiatives in media education, the results are uneven at best. For, despite enthusiastic calls for new digital literacy programmes and, interestingly, the recent embedding of media literacy requirements within national and international regulation, there remains little agreement about media literacy or how to measure it and, therefore, little evidence that efforts to improve it are effective. Indeed, there are good reasons to be concerned that the emancipatory vision of academics are being hugely scaled down by policy makers, that efforts to measure media literacy tend to trade validity for reliability, and that the persistent reduction of media literacy – which we argue to be a profoundly social phenomenon, a capability of a community or culture – to an individual property perpetuates inequalities and significantly undermines its potential benefits to democratic societies. Therefore, our aim in editing this collection is to encourage further theoretical, empirical and critical investigation of media literacy in the context of an acute awareness of the challenges associated with its promotion, resourcing and implementation in terms of policy commitment.

## CONTEXTUALISING MEDIA LITERACY

Prioritising questions of skill tends to neglect the social contexts in which the different technologies and texts that mediate communication are encountered (Livingstone, 2004). Literacy does not simply demand the knowledge and ability to encode and decode messages but also rather demands “applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use” (Scribner and Cole, 1981: 236). For example, researchers describe how the development of online relationships depends on how people participate in interpretive communities that value particular forms of literacy: in one study, analysis of media practices among high school students on Facebook indicates that youthful media competences are shaped by forms of cultural capital as mediated through the group-endorsed communication norms developed within an online peer culture (Papaioannou, 2011). Such research is consistent with the view that media literacy must be understood as a social practice, anchored in one’s social environment as well as in the wider social, cultural and political contexts (Baacke, 1999; Buckingham, 2007).

A contextualised approach requires a distinction between media literacy and media literacy practice or – to use Noam Chomsky's (2001) terms – between competence and performance, because being able to research how people act in relation to media does not necessarily allow us to judge their competence with respect to their complete abilities and knowledge that may to some extent be invisible for the researchers (Livingstone et al., 2013). Bearing this in mind, we must reflect on our methods and the focus of our research as well as our (normative) judgements and definitions of a media literate person – or community, or society. On the other hand, we need to consider a range of social and cultural factors which may also exert influence on what is considered media literate (and by whom). Then we need to inquire into the central focus of media literacy policies in different societies – whether this is the media system, the educational system, perceptions of moral and ethics or the image of media users or consumers (especially children) affects conceptions of media literacy and, in consequence policies for assessing and enabling media literacy (Donoso and Wijnen, 2013; Wijnen, 2008).

## ENABLING MEDIA LITERACY

Contextualising media literacy in sociocultural terms emphasizes not the unity but rather the plurality of media literacies, and this in turn has implications for media education. For example, what children and young people do with media and information technologies in school and outside school is a pressing question for educational models which aim to facilitate learning through harnessing the affordances of digital culture. It is still debated whether informal and formal learning practices should be viewed as complementary elements of a fluid learning process, recognising that they exist in different contexts and have different characteristics (Jenkins, 2012; Sefton-Green, 2013). Introducing media literacy in the classroom has also challenged educators to re-examine the purpose of integrating technology in education. Are transmedia story-telling or participation in digital media production of value in themselves (Drotner, 2010; Drotner and Schröder, 2010) or merely a means to an end of knowledge creation and negotiating new practices in learning (Thomas et al., 2007)? Certainly it is widely hoped that forging links between literacy, learning and pleasure in both informal and formal learning environments will encourage children and young people to acquire new ways of thinking through participating in new forms of practices and prepare them to adapt and negotiate new spaces and new technologies that continuously develop in a mediated society (Ito et al., 2010). Such a vision motivated the BBC, for example, to mobilise some 1,000 UK schools to produce their own news in 2012 (BBC News School Report, 2012): over 30,000 11-16 year olds turned their classrooms into newsrooms, choosing and making news for publication on their school websites and a total of 90,000 young people were involved over the academic year (Ofcom, 2012a). But are such initiatives sustainable? And how can they be scaled up to encompass the population?

More negatively, there are concerns about new forms of digital exclusion which pose additional burden to media literacy education (Buckingham, 2007). Communication in the digital world has led children and adults to engage in more cultural and social uses of

media, as demonstrated in the ever growing popularity of social media. But it remains to be seen as how we should evaluate these uses in terms beyond the functional, or whether these can be soundly integrated into more significant activities - for example, collaborative learning, constructing collective intelligence or sharing knowledge. Further, although social media have enabled and encouraged children to portray or view themselves as more active and autonomous, they also pose risks such as commercialization, risky contacts, inappropriate content, problematic conduct and reputational or identity risks (Livingstone, Haddon and Görzig, 2012). Addressing the complex and shifting balance between the benefits and risks of increased media use is, to a greater or lesser degree in different countries, a matter of policy, as discussed below.

## EUROPEAN POLICY TO PROMOTE MEDIA LITERACY

Within the European Union, along with many other parts of the world, strategic ambitions for media literacy encompass competences relating to education, citizenship and democratic participation are widely claimed. Benefits are conceived in terms of national competitiveness (a skilled labour market; strong creative industries), harm reduction (via responsible and aware consumers), empowerment at both individual and societal levels, and social inclusion. In short, media literate individuals living in a mediated society in late modernity are being valued and promoted as economically, socially and politically desirable – increasingly so with the onward march of a digitally convergent, networked society. For example, the 2010 Audio-visual Media Services Directive (EC 2010), building on prior initiatives by the EC's MEDIA and Safer Internet Programmes, the Life Long Learning Initiative and the EUROPE 2020 strategy, and informed by parallel initiatives from the Council of Europe and UNESCO, anticipates continual improvements in national levels of media literacy over the coming years. Further, in its 2009 Recommendation, the Commission encouraged member states to debate the inclusion of media literacy in compulsory education curricula. As Suzanne Ding (2011: 7) observes,

*the main task for the future will be to further strengthen the role of media literacy in these policy fields, streamline the understanding of media literacy and the requirements for media literacy education, encourage stakeholders in the public and private sector to increase their initiatives while constantly adapting the new results in media literacy research on the development of new technologies.*

Certainly such policies are evidence-based. In 2009, the study *Assessing media literacy in Europe* by the European Association of Viewers' Interests (EAVI) on behalf of the European Commission DG Information Society provided a comprehensive view of the concept of media literacy, "helping the Commission to carry out its obligation to report on media literacy levels in the EU 27 Member States and to implement concrete policies at a European Level" (Celot, 2011: 20). An assessment of film literacy in Europe is also underway, conducted by the British Film Institute in partnership with the Institute of Education-University of London and Film Education Company- with objectives to identify and analyse the existing situation concerning film literacy in Europe, including initiatives in informal and formal education settings across all age groups (European Commission Media, 2012). But are these policies proving successful? There are persistent difficulties in

developing rigorous indicators to evaluate progress in national levels of media literacy, and it is also unclear whether, when identified, these indicators will indeed reveal steady improvement.

More critical still, some question whether it is really society's wish for citizens to participate through digital media by contributing to cultural production and economic competitiveness or, instead, whether society's best interests would be better served by efforts to promote civic media literacies – enabling citizens to engage in social and political deliberations as part of the democratic process. This latter view eschews the individual skill model to emphasise, instead, that empowerment lies in the provision of institutional contexts (or 'opportunity structures') which enable people to participate and experience agency, including in and through the media (Coleman, 2007). Yet Ofcom's (2012b) report measuring media plurality across television, radio, the press and the internet suggests that the existing framework may be insufficient for ensuring that citizens are informed by a diverse range of views and for preventing excessive influence over political participation by dominant interests.

Yet more fundamental issues arise when one considers the social and economic conditions that account both for the relatively low levels of media literacy in the first place and, moreover, for the considerable inequalities in media literacy that largely reflect other forms of social disadvantage (Helsper, 2013). A recent assessment of media literacy levels within Europe by EAVI drew on an approach that reflects the ambition and breadth of their definition in encompassing both individual skills and environmental factors including media education, media policy, media availability and degree of plurality, roles of the media industry and civil society. This revealed a significant gap between media availability and the informed use of it made by citizens (Celot and Tornero, 2010). Where does this leave policy? The EC promises a new media literacy strategy in 2013 (Zacchetti, personal communication, Sept. 2012), although the threats to this on an international scale are very salient, especially in an 'age of austerity'.

## THE EMERGING AGENDA

If media are to play a significant role in facilitating participation in the public sphere and promoting democratic values, far greater institutional efforts will be required. Policy should be grounded in the experiences of media use, learning, expression and civic participation among citizens; and it should be developed and implemented through collaboration with academic stakeholders, schools, the media industry and civil society (Livingstone, 2011). But as yet, there is still insufficient dialogue between policy and academic development to underpin the development of evidence-based policy. This should be a two-way dialogue, with research addressing the problems faced by policy (for example, in measurement, implementation and evaluation). But also, as an independent and often critical enterprise, research should extend, challenge and critique policy, recognising the tension between the generally instrumental or 'administrative' ambitions of policy and the often-critical concerns of the academy (Lazarsfeld, 1941). Moreover, both

policy and research must be continually renewed as the media landscape, and societal expectations of its citizens, change and expand.

The emerging agenda is, on the one hand, descriptive – more and more people are using the media in more and more ways, and both researchers and policy makers need to grasp how media use is embedded in daily life. For example, Ofcom's (2012c) report shows that one third of UK 3-4 year olds go online: what do they do, with whom, and with what consequences? The research agenda must also take a historical perspective. Again to take a UK example, although use of the same indicators over several years reveals media literacy to be rising among children and adults over the past decade, such a rise is also shown to be small in scale and to have flat-lined in the last couple of years, raising questions about the efficacy of media literacy initiatives (Livingstone and Wang, 2011). Given the tendency of policymakers to focus more on instrumental or functional skills than wider civic or participatory competences and practices, we support the efforts of many researchers also to examine – and chart the barriers as well as enablers – for these in particular.

Last, the research agenda surely includes critical analysis of how media and communication technologies increasingly pervade all spheres of society, in ever more complex, subtle and often-opaque ways, placing ever greater demands on the competence of citizens and consumers to navigate them in empowering rather than exploitative ways. Since the technological infrastructure is heavily commercial and global and yet only partially regulated or transparent, these demands are significant and, as critics of today's neoliberal agenda fear, the burden of misunderstanding or mismanaging them will fall disproportionately on the already disadvantaged (Lunt and Livingstone, 2012). In short, media literacy, indeed literacy in general, has both an explanatory and a normative agenda. We must ask, first, what do citizens and consumers know about their changing media environment and, further, what should they know? And, then, most critically, what does it matter if they don't have this knowledge and in whose interest is it if they do?

## THIS ISSUE

This special issue includes 16 contributions from 23 authors, covering a considerable range of conceptual, methodological as well as educational issues in the recent media literacy discourse. We begin with four articles that present different approaches to the conceptual framing of media literacy. The first contribution comes from Divina Frau-Meigs: "Transliteracy as the New Research Horizon for Media and Information Literacy". She considers the notion of 'transliteracy' as a means to harness the potential advantages and mitigate the risks of the so-called 'Information Society'. In addition to an epistemological analysis and a dynamic mapping of transliteracy, she demands "a detailed study of all the political and policy-relevant issues concerning the regulation of [...] transliteracy as a collective phenomenon" (p. 22). The next article by Sian Barber explores media literacy and active user-engagement and interaction in relation to online audio-visual content. She questions how user expectations fit within digital initiatives which prioritise access

and preservation of archives and online research rather than active user-engagement. Through interpreting the results of a qualitative case study of 82 German children, Senta Pfaff-Rüdiger, Claudia Riesmeyer and Anna Kümpel discuss the relation of media literacy to developmental tasks and conclude that a skill-based media literacy model can help to explain digital inequalities. Uwe Hasebrink's article highlights dimensions of the activity of the user which have not been adequately examined in the current media literacy discourse. He argues that media literacy not only means actively participating in media-related communicative practices but also taking responsibility for and engaging in the formation of the technical, political and economic conditions of communication processes and the overall media environment. He discusses the potential role of the audience as well as concrete instruments for strengthening user participation in media governance as an 'overlooked' aspect of media literacy.

Among the diverse challenges that promotion of media literacy must face, researchers need to tackle the problems of measurement. The problem currently attracting attention in the European Union centres on the fact that the *Audiovisual Media Services Directive* (2007) has demanded measurable criteria to be applied in the effort to improve media literacy in the adult population. The articles by Monica Bulger and Paolo Celot address this methodological challenge. Paolo Celot presents the EAVI studies of media literacy, among the most comprehensive across Europe in terms of their purpose and scope. He first briefly describes the results of wide comparative investigations concerning all 27 European Union member states, conducted for the European Commission by the author in a consortium with other partners. Then he provides future scenarios and perspectives on media literacy in Europe, pinpointing the emerging trends and international expert recommendations which indicate the priorities in order to start new, concrete initiatives. Monica E. Bulger focuses on the task of measuring national levels of media literacy using the report "Testing and refining criteria to assess media literacy levels in all EU Member States" as a case study. She argues that conceptually, approaches to measuring media literacy are often broadly inclusive, without necessarily considering how media literacy is enacted or identifying specific examples of media literate actors within daily contexts. But logistically, indicators are often defined in terms of existing data or data that can be easily collected, rather than developing measures with stronger validity, as could be identified through empirical research.

The third section of this special issue focuses on educational issues. Hans Martens argues that it is vital to recognise preexisting national and regional differences in order to understand the diversity of European media literacy practice. By examining three media literacy initiatives in the Flemish part of Belgium, he concludes that media literacy is better understood as a fluid construct of media-related knowledge and skills. From his point of view, this open perspective should also be applied when developing models of media education. Jos de Haan and Nathalie Sonck reflect on digital skills research in the last 15 years and the implication of this body of research for media literacy policy. They focus especially on the question of the degree to which media literacy research is able to support policy development. The next article by Carmen Marta and María del Mar Grandío Pérez offers a critical perspective on the tradition of media literacy research in Spain in order to



explore how Spanish academics, industry practitioners and policy makers are facing the challenges in media literacy policy development and implementation specifically with regard to media education curriculum in public schools. Asking what pedagogic model is suitable for media literacy education in a mediated society where mediated citizenship is becoming increasingly important, Ben Andrews and Julian McDougall propose a model of curation pedagogy for the inexpert. They suggest that students 'show' media literacy in new spaces – not by recourse to skills, competences or analytical unmasking of the properties of a (contained) text, but by exhibiting – curating a moment in time of textual meaning-making and meaning-taking, while also mindful of the artifice of such an attempt to hold and curate the flow of meaning.

Finally, this special issue concludes with five book reviews. Fausto Colombo reviews Peter Lunt's and Sonia Livingstone's book entitled "Media Regulation: Governance and the Interests of Citizens and Consumers" (Sage, 2012), Stjepka Popović offers her opinion on two books: "Djeca medija: Od marginalizacije do senzacije" (Children of the Media: From Marginalization to Sensation) (Matica hrvatska, 2011) by Lana Ciboci, Igor Kanižaj and Danijel Labaš, and "Vidi me, čuj me – Vodič za uporabu konvencije UN-a o pravima osoba s invaliditetom i promicanje prava djece" (See Me, Hear Me: A Guide to Using the UN Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities to Promote the Rights of Children) (UNICEF, 2011) by Gerison Lansdown. Lejla Turčilo reviews "Putokazi prema slobodnim i odgovornim medijima" (Guideposts to Free and Accountable Media) (Kuća ljudskih prava and FPZG, 2012) edited by Viktorija Car. The last one, Neven Benko discusses David Gauntlett's "Making is Connecting – The Social Meaning of Creativity, from DIY and Knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0" (Polity, 2011).

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