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Mapping Media Literacy: Key Concepts and Future Directions

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Abstract

This chapter examines how different researchers define media literacy; i.e., what people need to know about the media and their use in order to be deemed media literate. As opposed to previous overviews, this chapter attempts to structure the multitude of definitions using a schematic representation of media production and use. Such a construction provides a thematic overview of diverse definitions of media literacy. Thus, it specifies key aspects of the media and their use in terms of media literacy and corresponding emphasis in the media literacy literature. This analysis reveals that the vast majority of researchers consider understanding how media content is created to be a central aspect of media literacy whereas scholars treat the ability to handle the media in a constructive manner as far less important, and the media literacy literature virtually ignores the fact that media producers are prone to media influence. Furthermore, this chapter indicates that little has changed in the field of media literacy in the past few decades, with the majority of the dimensions of media literacy present in definitions utilized in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, this chapter also identifies the features of media literacy that require additional investigation, such as the relationship between media literacy and Internet-based technologies.

Introduction

If everyday life is a play, then the media are the lead actors. They remain on stage in virtually every act. If people are not actually reading newspapers, listening to the radio, or watching television, they can often be found talking about what they have seen in movies, thinking about what they read in a magazine, or using the knowledge acquired through the media in some other way. This play, however, is not staged by the lead actors only; i.e., the media are not in complete control of people's daily lives. Among numerous other actors, media literacy plays opposite the media. Some people "read" the media in a more knowledgeable and critical way, i.e., they are more media literate, and are thus better equipped to deal with the media.

Due to the large role that the media play in people's daily lives, an enormous diversity of definitions of media literacy exist. Large numbers of scholars have been creating a wide variety of definitions since the 1970s. Because of the size and scope of media literacy scholarship, we should not underestimate the importance of a well-structured and thorough overview. Various scholars have already created overviews which summarize a part of the ideas about media literacy, and we will discuss these overviews in more detail below. However, while acknowledging that these overviews do provide interesting and valuable insights into the current ideas held by media literacy scholars, these overviews fall short in one respect. Most reviews merely list who defined media literacy in which way. They concentrate on either a historical account of definitions (e.g., Buckingham, 1998), a description of media curricula (e.g., Bazalgette, Bevort, & Savino, 1992; J. A. Brown, 1991, 1998), or a description of how researchers have conceptualized media literacy in different countries (e.g., Hart, 1998; Piette & Giroux, 1997). As a result, they do not create a structured view of the field, comparing the different aspects that various definitions touch upon, and pointing out the possible bias that is part of the current definitions of media literacy.

In this chapter, we will structure the multitude of opinions about the concept of media literacy according to topical themes. This overview lists who said what about media literacy, but, more importantly, it provides an idea of the dominant themes in the media literacy arena. Additionally, it illuminates which areas of the media and their usage receive less attention and which could, thus, be further elaborated. In order to attain this goal, we utilize a schematic

representation of media use and media production to organize what has been written about the concept of media literacy so far. This schematic representation enables us to answer the question: How is media literacy defined? Furthermore, it allows for a description of how the definitions relate to media production and use. In the creation of this overview, we decided that each aspect of media literacy had to be mentioned and explicated by at least one publication from a peer-reviewed source.

Within the field of media literacy, we discovered some variation in research depending on three factors, namely the genre on which the research focuses, the focus of the research in terms of medium (i.e., “old”: newspaper, television, and film, or “new”: the Internet), and the country from which the research originated. This chapter provides insight into whether this variation also leads to different approaches to what media literacy should entail. Furthermore, in the past, various researchers have defined so-called “key concepts;” that is, they presented a list of abilities, skills, or knowledge that they deemed to be the essential aspects of media literacy. Examples of such key concepts include the principles of media education put forward by the British Film Institute in the 1980s (Bazalgette, 1992), the definition of media literacy as advanced during the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy (Aufderheide, 1997), the principles advocated by the Center for Media Literacy (Thoman, 1999), the theory of media literacy developed by Potter (2004), and finally, the framework for media literacy recently developed by Primack et al. (2006). This chapter explicates how these key concepts fit into the schematic representation of media literacy.

In order to collect relevant literature, we searched the databases ERIC and PsycInfo, as well as the Social Sciences Citation Index and Communication Abstracts, using the keywords “media education” and “media literacy”. We conducted these searches at regular intervals between March 2002 and March 2007. In addition, we selected relevant literature using the reference lists of articles in the database search. Although each search revealed new contributions to the field of media literacy, after a few years, it became apparent that new contributions generally added little in terms of new insights into what media literacy should entail and that the four databases showed significant overlap, not only in terms of articles found, but also when it came to insights and perspectives on media literacy. Most of the differences between authors tended to arise from a focus on different genres, media, or countries. This chapter describes aspects of media literacy that most authors agree on, as well as those areas that only a few authors deem important. Thus, we incorporate definitions from a wide variety of media and genres as well as ones that originated outside the United States and the United Kingdom, the two leading countries regarding media literacy.

Roots of Media Literacy and Media Education

The field of media literacy is both rich and multi-faceted, a feat which will become apparent through this overview. The richness of the field can in part be attributed to the fact that media literacy has taken root in many different areas, ranging from different scholarly perspectives to the arenas of the media practitioner and the media user. Before we expand on how media literacy has been defined, we will discuss the different areas which contribute to the media literacy arena.

Media literacy is one concept from the field of communication that has made the transition into societal discussions. For instance, when discussing the harmful effects of watching R&B videos or playing violent computer games, most people assume that not everyone is media literate enough to handle the messages of sex and violence supposedly mediated through these videos and games. Additionally, when pressure groups try to ban the *Harry Potter* books because of their alleged occult content, they assume that children are not

capable of distinguishing between fact and fiction and will therefore not be able to judge these books on their own merits, and will, as a result, go religiously astray. Moreover, when families discuss why their children cannot watch certain television programs or play specific video games or read certain books--that is, why they are not media literate enough to use those media--the parents provide their offspring with a form of media education when they explain their position (Means Coleman & Fisherkeller, 2003).

Many people feel, however, that media education is not solely the responsibility of the parents. It is generally assumed that professional educators have a responsibility in this respect, too. Encouraging critical thinking is one of the main aims of education. Hence schools should endeavor to make their pupils more media literate, to teach them about the media; about the production of media messages, about media use, and about the influence the media may exert on themselves, others, and society. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the roots of media literacy are located in the field of education. Schools, as early as the 1960s (e.g., Hall & Whannel, 1964; Murdock & Phelps, 1973) were concerned with teaching students about the media. Even today, media literacy remains a grassroots concept with schools and other educational settings constantly supplying new initiatives and ideas which enrich the field of media literacy (e.g., Fox, 1995; Gaudard & Theveniaut, 1992; Maness, 2004). When it comes to promoting critical thinking regarding the media or related issues, education plays a primary role. Educators have the privilege of sometimes being the first to introduce children to a new perspective on the media. They can play an important part not only in how children perceive media content such as commercials or violent fiction programs (e.g., Lloyd-Kolkin, Wheeler, & Strand, 1980; Vooijs & van der Voort, 1990), but also in how children use their leisure time (Kline, 2005), as well as whether they feel empowered enough to create their own media content (e.g., D. Lemish & P. Lemish, 1997), or to try and influence media stations or networks (e.g., Hobbs, 2005a). The notion that education is an essential factor in media literacy is underlined by Dennis (2004) who laments the fact that there are so little media education opportunities for adults, and argues that continuing education is paramount to creating critical media users. The importance of media education also became apparent in Potter's (2004) recent study into media literacy. Here, Potter pointed out that "personal locus," or a person's ability to control the media and mindfulness when using the media is the most important factor when explaining the degree to which a person is media literate. From this perspective, media literacy is more than just knowledge or skills, it is a state of mind that requires continuous monitoring. Although Potter (2004) thus shifts the responsibility of critical media use to the user, he still supports the idea that media education programs are essential when it comes to increasing people's control and mindfulness (p. 98).

Although the field of education is said to be the foundation of media literacy, the general concern with media literacy extends beyond the field of education. For several decades now, media literacy has attracted the attention of communication researchers throughout the Western world. These scholars have focused on defining media literacy, measuring media literacy, and developing media education programs. While doing so, they have always worked with the latest findings from communication studies about such topics as media production, media effects, and the interpretation of media content. Thus, media education programs play a role in the dispersion of scientific knowledge about the media across society, and the measurement of media literacy shows the extent to which efforts to disperse this knowledge have met with success. As such, the concept of media literacy constitutes a bridge between society and communication science. Media literacy research reveals the societal relevance of our efforts as communication researchers to come to grips with the myriad aspects of media and communication. Therefore, we deem it relevant to shed light on how media literacy scholars define media literacy, that is, what people need to know about the media, their use, and their influence in order to be deemed media literate.

Media literacy, however, is not only relevant because it bridges the gap between communication and society. It is also relevant because it implies a critical attitude towards the media, one that is functional in many ways for media literate media consumers and their society. In that respect, media literacy has attained relevance far beyond the field of media literacy and media education studies. Health communication research has, for instance, revealed that the media play a role in obesity and smoking, while studies into media literacy and health-related issues have shown that media literacy can have a curbing influence on unhealthy attitudes or behaviors (J. D. Brown, 2006). As another example, several projects found that media education can play a positive role in reducing the attitudes that could lead to eating disorders (Irving & Berel, 2001; Wilksch, Tiggeman, & Wade, 2006). Moreover, media literate “couch potatoes” are better able to recognize media habits that may lead to obesity, hence media literacy could decrease the risk of obesity (Kline, 2005). Similarly, more media literate teenagers are better equipped to resist luring images of smoking heroes (Primack et al., 2006). Another example of the possibly beneficiary functions of being media literate concerns media and politics. The media play a crucial role in the political processes of Western democracies; both voters and politicians are dependent on the media. However, according to various political communication scholars (Entman, 1989; Keane, 1991), the media serve their own goals and those goals are not necessarily compatible with democracy’s needs since quality reporting on current events and political developments may not always lead to the high ratings or the large circulation needed by viable media. A media literate populace and a media literate politician are aware of such potential clashes of interests and may thus critically circumvent the potential political pitfalls presented by their dependency on the media (Brookfield, 1987; Covington, 2004). Next to health and politics, intercultural communication is another field in which media literacy can play a large role, and may be beneficiary to media users. Communication between and within cultures is easily hampered by stereotypes and those stereotypes may inadvertently be propagated by the media because people are largely dependent on the media for their information on other (sub-)cultures (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Van Dijk, 1987). Furthermore, communicators always bring their own cultural knowledge—including their prejudices—when they create meanings. Subsequently, this cultural knowledge influences the way they “decode” or “encode” the messages they exchange (cf. Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Hall, 1980; Lind, 1996). A critical awareness of such intercultural bias in communication dampens the possible detrimental consequences for intercultural communication (e.g., Vargas, 2006).

In short, a large number of diverse fields have contributed to the concept of media literacy. We shall now expand on how media literacy has been defined over the past few decades and across numerous academic arenas.

Mapping the Field

Media literacy centers on knowing how stakeholders construct and receive media messages. A quick glance at any of the major contributions to the field of media literacy will confirm this statement (e.g., Bazalgette, 1992; Thoman, 1999). In spite of the large numbers of different definitions of media literacy, all agree on one fact, namely that media literacy entails an awareness of one or more aspects of the use and production of media messages. Therefore, the best way to structure the wide variety of definitions entails creating a schematic representation of media production and use in which all of these definitions can be classified.

Although the processes of media production and use have been conceptualized in diverse ways, all of these conceptualizations include three players: the producer, the user and the media (e.g., McQuail, 2000). Therefore, these three participants comprise the central

elements of the schematic representation used in this literature review. The “producer” refers to any individual who is involved in the creation of media products, while the “user” refers to any individual using the media. These two elements interact with the media through four different processes, signified by four arrows in Figure 1.

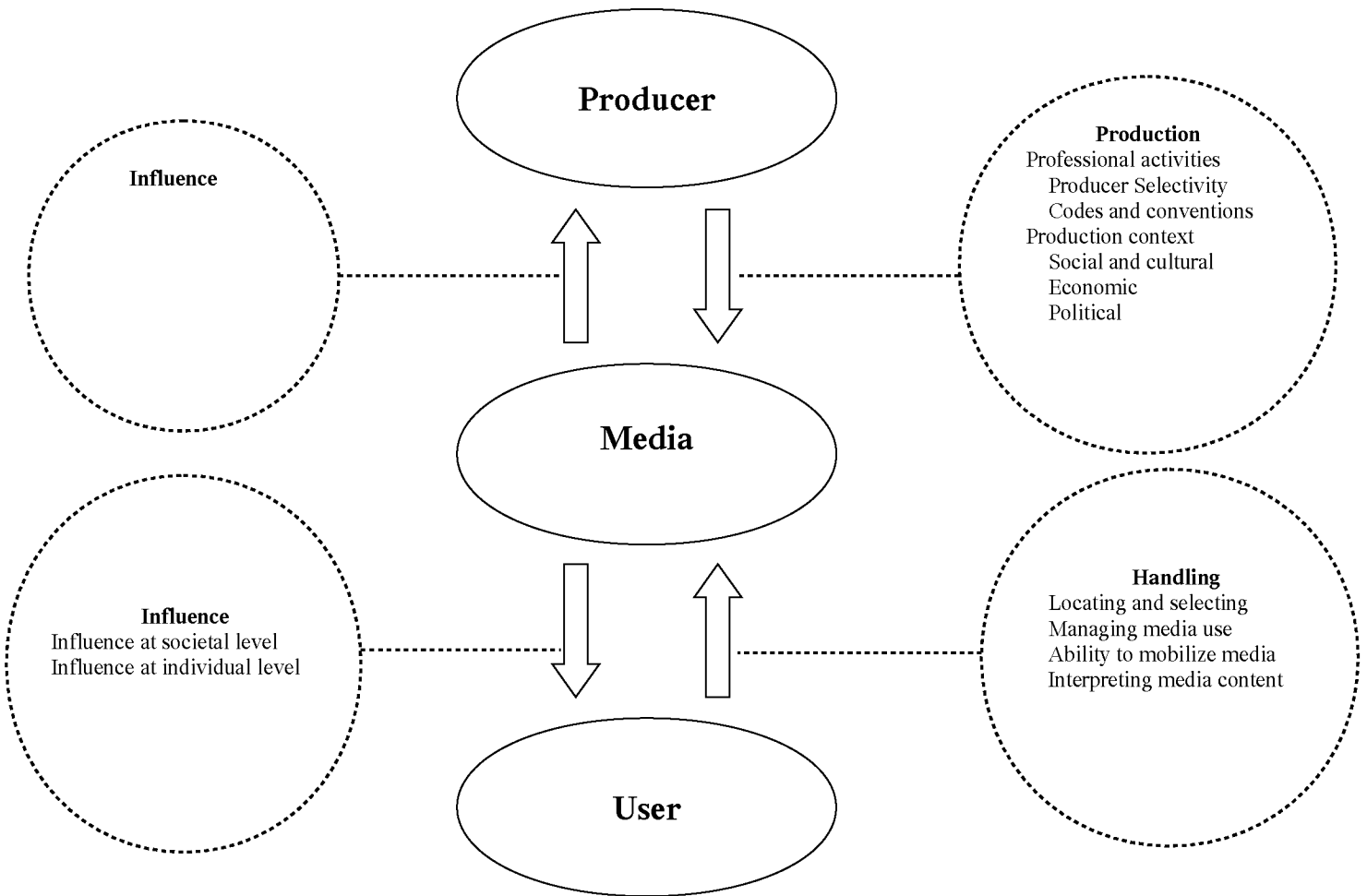


Figure 1. Aspects of media literacy.

The first arrow in the schematic representation refers to how the media influence a producer. It focuses on the manner in which the media can influence the producer’s ideas about media production. The second arrow, which runs from the producer to the media, indicates those processes through which stakeholders construct media content. The third arrow denotes how the media influence a media user. Finally, the fourth arrow centers on how people handle the media. When using this schematic representation as a starting point, media literacy can be seen as an understanding of these four arrows, or dimensions, of media production and use.

Literature Overview: Aspects of Media Literacy

In this section of the chapter, we will organize the different conceptualizations of media literacy used in the field by connecting them to the arrows of the schematic representation of media literacy delineated in Figure 1. For a complete overview of all of the articles and books considered in this chapter and categorized within the schematic representation, see Appendix 1. It delineates which authors mentioned which aspects of media literacy.

Media Influence on Producers

We begin by exploring media influence on the producers of media content. Media producers not only craft the media, but they also use them, both as professionals and as private individuals, and they can, thus, be affected by the content and style of media representations. For example, a television news producer might see a breaking story on another news channel and considers running the same story. Further, the make-over of one television station could give giving the producers of another ideas about how to alter the image of their own station.

Although it is relevant for media users to be aware of this line of influence of the media, only one author fleetingly refers to it when she described media literacy as including the ability to recognize the complex nature of authorship (Quin, 2003). The notion that media producers themselves also use and are, thus, influenced by other media content appears to be ignored in the field of media literacy. Researchers do not generally describe producers as anything other than people who construct messages in a certain context. We will expand on this important issue in the next section.

Production of Media Content

The schematic representation in Figure 1 also suggests that media content is a construction. As detailed below, media literacy literature indicates that the way in which producers create media content results from two factors: professional activities and production context. Although most authors discuss either one or both of these factors, some focus solely on the concept of construction in its entirety.

Generally, researchers argue that awareness of the constructed nature of media content is essential to a valid evaluation of media content. Bazalgette (1992), in his description of the key aspects of media education that have been widely adopted across the United Kingdom, noted that media education includes teaching that media content does not mirror reality, but instead, the media create their own version of reality. During the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, scholars from around the world agreed that one of the basic precepts of media literacy involved the notion that “media are constructed and construct reality” (Aufderheide, 1997, p. 80). Thoman (1999), founder of the Center of Media Literacy, affirmed this point, noting that media literacy encompasses the awareness that media messages are constructed and that “whatever is constructed by just a few people, then becomes ‘the way it is’ for the rest of us” (p. 51).

Morgan (1998) emphasized that one of the key concepts of media literacy in Canada entails the understanding that all media messages are constructions. Scharrer (2003) stressed that media literacy requires realizing that “the media construct and are constructions of reality” (p.70). Brookfield (1986) cited various empirical studies when claiming that the news must be regarded as a constructed reality. Thoman and Jolls (2004) framed this same principle a little differently when they posited that people need to grasp that the media are not windows

on the world (see also Hobbs, 2005a). Criticos (1997) further expanded on this point by positing that media education should teach people to see the human agency and manufactured nature of the media.

This aspect of the key concepts of media literacy has filtered through to countries besides the U.S. and the U.K. as well. In South Africa, media educators focus on teaching their students to become aware of the representation and construction of reality in the media, particularly in newspapers. Media educators in South Africa maintain that “media education is a potentially liberating force” one that helps students understand themselves and society, and helps create critical citizens (Court & Criticos, 1998, p. 100).

Hobbs (1998b) claimed that orienting toward media messages as constructions enables viewers to better appreciate and interpret content. Masterman (1997, 1998) added that people need to know about production because it enables them to challenge the “naturalness” of media images.

Some authors argue, as will become apparent in the remainder of this paragraph, that the best way to learn about the constructed nature of media content is through being involved in its construction. In the United Kingdom, media education includes the production of media messages (Bazalgette, 1992), and scholars gathered at the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy concurred (Aufderheide, 1997). Desimoni (1992) described how a Swiss media education program echoed this perspective, and the Israeli ministry of education contended that the ability to create and produce a media message should be a part of any media education program (D. Lemish & P. Lemish, 1997). In Denmark, media production constitutes an important part of many media education projects; Tufte (1992) argued that media production aids students in acquiring superior analytical abilities regarding media content as well as helping them to understand that television portrays a transformed and selective part of reality. In Australia, learning how to produce media content was the foundation of many media education programs for a long time, and it remains an essential part of media literacy teaching (Quin, 2003). In the U.S., Tyner (2003) described how teaching students to create their own interactive multimedia, such as an online digital archive, enables them to improve their general problem solving skills and the complexity of their knowledge structures. As Appendix 1 details, production is an important part of media literacy, and as such it has become an integral part of many media education projects. We will elaborate this finding in the conclusion.

Within the dimension of media production, scholars described the production of media content as hinging on two factors: professional activities and production context. In the next two sections, we will discuss these factors in more detail.

Professional activities

Professional activities play a central role constructing media messages. This element refers to all actions undertaken by media producers when creating media content. Buckingham (2003) insisted that media literacy includes an awareness of who the people are that make the messages, while Covington (2004) described how Canadian media education programs strive to make students aware of the creative processes that take place during media production. This research tends to concentrate on the selectivity of the producers and the codes and conventions used during the construction of media content.

Producer Selectivity. Producers make conscious and subconscious decisions about what to include (and how) in fictional and non-fictional media messages. In their framework for media literacy, Primack et al. (2006) claimed that one of the core concepts of media literacy entailed knowing that messages filter reality and omit information. Additionally, this framework affirmed that messages contain values and specific points of view, something that media literate people should realize. Several years earlier, Thomas (1999) also asserted that

the media “have embedded values and points of view” (p.52). She argued that the media carry a subtext of who and what is (and is not) important, something that people should be able to “read” in order to properly interpret media messages. Potter (2004), in his theory of media literacy concurred when he argued that “much of the information from the media does not reflect the real world very well” (p.93), and pointed out that many news programs overemphasize certain events and people, while ignoring others.

Hence, media literacy includes knowing about the selectivity which is part of the nature of a mediated message. As Masterman (1983) suggested, “Every television image is, of course, a selected one” (p. 208). In Israel, the ministry of education stressed that media literacy includes the ability to “understand that mass media products are a result of professional and personal activities and not a neutral reflection of reality” (D. Lemish & P. Lemish, 1997, p. 221). Livingstone (2003) described how different British institutions view media literacy, and the British Office of Communications argued that one of the goals of its office should be to increase public understanding of “the processes by which materials are selected and made available” (p. 7). More specifically, Hobbs (2005a) highlighted critical reading and viewing as one of the phases of media literacy, especially the study of “patterns in choice of aesthetic forms, genres and modalities, with an emphasis on choices that shape the representation of social reality” (p. 20). Furthermore, several scholars from around the globe emphasize that media education should teach students that television constructs reality, i.e., that what is shown on television may seem like reality, but that it depicts a selective and transformed part of reality (J. A. Brown, 1991; Lloyd-Kolkin et al., 1980; Tufte, 1992; Vooijs & van der Voort, 1990).

In some cases, media literacy researchers expanded the notion of selectivity by also examining how the selection that takes place during media production can embed certain values and/or points of view in the messages. Thoman and Jolls (2004) noted that “[b]ecause all media messages are constructed, choices have to be made. These choices inevitably reflect the values, attitudes, and points of view of the ones doing the constructing” (p. 26). Brookfield (1986) concurred, claiming that “producers and reporters select from the range of possible interpretations of news events the ideas, beliefs and values that reflect the dominant culture” (p. 158). Brookfield added:

If adults begin to speculate on how and why television emphasizes certain views and messages, they will be more likely to ask why other views and messages were excluded and how apparently ‘neutral’ events might have been presented from a different perspective. (p. 162)

In Northern Ireland, teachers enable students to understand that newspaper reporters present the news from a certain viewpoint and that the same event can be viewed from a completely different angle, such as a Catholic or a Protestant orientation (Collins, 1998). Anderson (1983) suggested that students of the media should be able to recognize the values presented by a media message as well as to compare those values to their own and the ones held by their society.

A large number of media literacy projects also address the notion of producers’ motivations, purposes, and viewpoints. These scholars reason that, if media users understand that producers have specific motivations regarding a media message, they will also grasp that this motivation contributes to a certain selectivity regarding the creation of the message. This notion will be further elaborated in this paragraph. Masterman (1983) observed that people need to realize that a reporter’s task “is not to seek out the truth of particular situation, but to seek evidence which supports an angle which will have been pretty well set before the reporter leaves the office” (p. 208). For example, a Swiss media education program emphasized producers’ motivations and aims (Desimoni, 1992). This line of thinking appears to be echoed by a study that specifically looked into how teenage girls’ interpreted weight loss

advertisements. Hobbs, Broder, Pope, and Rowe (2006) defined media literacy as encompassing the ability to recognize the author's purpose, goals, motives and point of view because it increases critical thinking skills regarding media messages that might influence body image, eating disorders, and nutrition. Similarly, Hobbs (2005b) focused on how media literate youngsters regard the news. For Hobbs, media literacy includes awareness of the author's purpose as well as omitted topics, perspectives, and contents from a news broadcast. Alvermann (2004), in a study that explored youngsters and Internet-based technologies, noted that developing critical awareness in relation to new media and internet-based technologies meant alerting youngsters to the fact that all texts promote or silence certain opinions or perspectives.

Producer selectivity is not the only factor that determines media content. Codes and conventions employed by the producers also help shape the message, and we will explore the literature that addresses this factor next.

Codes and conventions. Anderson (1983) summarized the meaning of "codes" and "conventions" when he mentioned that media literacy should include an understanding of the grammar and syntax of television. During the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, scholars agreed that media literacy involves recognizing that "form and content are related in each medium, each of which has a unique aesthetic, codes, and conventions" (Aufderheide, 1997, p. 80). Primack et al.'s (2006) framework for media literacy also indicated that producers use multiple production techniques to create messages. Thoman (1999) linked media literacy with the awareness that media messages utilize their own language. In the U.K., educators encourage students to look at media content and examine codes and conventions that "refer to, symbolize, or summarize particular meanings or sets of ideas" (Bazalgette, 1992, p. 212). Likewise, in the Netherlands, most media education programs incorporate learning about the language used to create media content (Ketzer, Swinkels, & Vooijs, 1989). Similarly, in South Africa, media educators focus on the technical and symbolic codes used to create messages as well as the expression of director intentions (Court & Criticos, 1998). Moreover, in Israel, media education programs teach students to recognize "different forms of expression in the languages of the mass media" and to understand "the connections between contents and form of media products in general" (D. Lemish & P. Lemish, 1997, p. 221). Finally, a number of media education programs that focus on rendering respondents critical towards advertising, include teaching how to recognize the persuasive techniques used in commercials. For example, viewers should be able to distinguish a program from a commercial, discern special effects, visual and verbal elements, and symbolism, comprehend the persuasive intent underlying a commercial, and realize the role of actors in advertisements (J. D. Desmond & Jeffries-Fox, 1983; S. Feshbach, N. D. Feshbach, & Cohen, 1982; Hobbs, 2004; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006)

Most media literacy authors distinguish between two types of conventions: (a) production procedures and (b) dramatic and/or narrative codes, such as genre. These two types of conventions will be addressed below. Anderson (1983) argued that an awareness of these conventions is essential for it decreases the chance that people will make "reality errors in assessing behaviors presented in television content" (p. 307).

Production procedures include, for instance, sound, camera point of view, lighting techniques, framing, special effects, the use of props, and the constraints of time and technology. Bazalgette (1992), in his description of the key aspects utilized in the U.K., claimed that students should know what kinds of technology are used in the production of media messages. Armed with such information, students should be able to recognize the role of technology in shaping the meaning of a text and note which audience members possess the required equipment to access the message. Potter (2004) agreed when he made the point that people should understand the meanings of certain techniques used in the media, such as the

close-up and the flashback. Thoman (1999) argued that an awareness of the technical conventions used in a message helps people to be “less susceptible to manipulation” (p. 51; see also, Piette & Giroux, 1997; Thoman & Jolls, 2004). Vande Berg, Wenner, and Gronbeck (2004) suggested that media literacy involves knowing that technical and conventional codes “work to position viewers to ‘see’ the ‘preferred’ meanings and to create ‘oppositional’ meanings” (p. 222). In Switzerland, media education includes gaining knowledge and understanding regarding “images, sounds, media texts, encoding of signs and the production of meaning” (Desimoni, 1992, p. 34).

In addition to these more “visual” production procedures, there are also those production procedures which remain less visible but play a role in shaping the message nonetheless. Educators in the U.K. stress the constraints of time and technology and how these issues can affect a media message (Bazalgette, 1992). Masterman (1983) agreed, claiming expectations of a certain quality in terms of television images poses constraints. He also argued that media users should be aware that the presence of a camera and a production crew can affect the events on screen.

The second category includes definitions of media literacy that focused on the knowledge of non-technical codes such as awareness of genre, narrative structures, and the distinction between fiction and fact. Media education programs in the U.K. highlight the awareness of different genres in the media. Experts reasoned that the genre of a program influences how viewers interpret programs and that recognizing a genre will facilitate the recognition of the codes and conventions that are typical to each genre (Bazalgette, 1992). In addition, in his theory for media literacy, Potter’s (2004) definition of media literacy included an understanding of the different formulas that are typical to certain types of programs such as the news and entertainment shows, and Hobbs (2005a) noted the ability to distinguish a commercial from regular programming. McMahon (2003) provided another example of dramatic and/or narrative codes when he argued that media literacy should include the ability to identify narrative elements such as character, plot, and setting. Media education programs in the Netherlands (Ketzler et al., 1989) have historically included teaching about the relationship between audiovisual products and reality, as well as focusing on narrative structures. In Northern Ireland (Collins, 1998), various teachers focus on making students aware of the use of stereotyping and emotive language to convey a message. Emotive language also constitutes a topic of various media education programs in South Africa (Court & Criticos, 1998), where some of the projects also concentrated on perceiving bias in media texts. A project aimed at understanding how teenage girls interpreted weight loss advertisements alleged that media literacy entailed the ability to recognize persuasive claims and other devices used to construct messages (Hobbs et al., 2006). Codes and conventions play a pivotal role in shaping media content. In the next section, we discuss another factor that influences media content—the production context.

Production Context

Besides the professional activities described in the previous section, the second factor which influences media message construction can be best described as the production context. This factor refers to the various institutions that shape the content of media messages. A large amount of media literacy literature mentions an awareness of the institutions that produce mediated messages. J. A. Brown noted:

Critical viewing is one major component of media literacy, referring to the study of media industries and of economic, political and ethical contexts to learn about forces shaping media content, including advertising economics and government regulation and public interest groups. (2001, p. 684)

In Israel, media education programs include the ability to analyze the communication structures to which students are exposed, to know about the historical development of the mass media, and to evaluate expected developments in the media arena (D. Lemish & P. Lemish, 1997). One very practical media education project in Canada (Covington, 2004) actually entailed media producers coming into class and explaining about the various influences that help shape the process of media production. Media literacy scholars generally focus on one or more of the following aspects of production contexts: social and cultural, economic aspects, and political. Each of these aspects will be elaborated on in the following three sections.

Social and cultural aspects. In his summary of critical viewing skills, J. A. Brown (1991) found that a number of media education projects taught students about the role that social and cultural aspects play in the production of media content, a notion which has been echoed by various others, and which will be expanded below. In Switzerland, media education encompasses an awareness of the social context of media production (Desimoni, 1992), while, in Israel, media education programs integrate instruction about ideological aspects of the media (D. Lemish & P. Lemish, 1997). Masterman (1983), when outlining his definition of television literacy, referred to the conservative nature of media institutions and the middle-class biases of their staff. According to J. A. Brown, the Catholic Education office in Australia claimed that people need to know about the structure of media institutions in order to become “discriminating truth seekers” (p. 74). Furthermore, Thoman and Jolls (2004) claimed that media content reflects the values, attitudes, and perspectives of the ones doing the constructing. The ability to identify these values as they are expressed through media content will render people “more tolerant of differences and more astute in our decision making to accept or reject the message” (p. 26). Some authors, when describing the social context of media production, also referred to the social position of the user, seemingly making the point that production and usage are inexorably linked. McMahan (2003), for instance, pointed out that media literate people should be able to make “the connection between the construction of texts, their contexts, and the societies in which they are produced and consumed” (p.12). Alvermann (2004) described the discussion surrounding new media as centered on “the perceived need to develop young people’s critical awareness of how all authored texts...situate them as readers, writers, and viewers within particular historical and cultural contexts” (p. 78). Finally, Vande Berg et al. (2004) claimed that one of the goals of television education programs should be to teach students how to evaluate their encounters with television from a social perspective and to assess the social meanings of a television program.

In short, the social and cultural aspects of media production encompass a wide array of phenomena, which range from understanding how the values of the producers can influence the media message to evaluating the social meanings of a television program. An awareness of these aspects should, according to the authors cited above, render media users more critical of media content.

Economic aspects. Some authors, in their discussion of media literacy, concentrated on the economic aspect of media institutions, which we will expand on below. The National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy (Aufderheide, 1997) asserted that media literacy entailed an awareness of the economic constraints that surrounded media production as well as of the commercial implications. In their framework for media literacy, Primack et al. (2006) described how media literacy involves realizing that media messages are produced to create a profit, a point echoed by Thoman (1999), who stated that all media messages are created to sell something. In the United Kingdom, the British Film Institute considers power and profit motives, as well as ownership patterns and market forces, essential elements of any media education program (Bazelgette, 1992).

The notion that knowing about the economic aspects of media production comprises an essential part of media literacy has also been accepted outside the U.S. and the U.K. Desimoni (1992), for instance, in his description of a Swiss media education program, mentioned that media literacy includes an understanding of the producers of media content, particularly an awareness that “behind the message there exists a socio-economic system with its financial and ideological implications” (p. 34). In the U.K., Masterman (1983) explained that, because the media are owned and controlled by rich and powerful corporations, their views most likely reflect the ideas of capitalism and consumerism and, as such, people need to be aware of the economic factors that shape media production. In the U.S., Rapaczynski, D. G. Singer, and J. L. Singer (1982) noted that children should grasp the nature of commercial TV and the purpose of commercials.

In addition, media education includes teaching about how the media aim to identify new audiences, construct them if necessary, then predict their responses and behavior, and use this knowledge for advertising purposes (Bazalgette, 1992). Other scholars argue that a media literate person must understand that the primary function of commercial media is the “packaging” of audiences for sale to advertisers in order to make a profit, a point advanced by Primack et al. (2006) in their media literacy framework. Dorr, Browne Graves, and Phelps (1980) taught children that programs are broadcast to make money, that money for programs comes from advertisements, and that the audience size determines how much money a station makes. Vande Berg et al. (2004) also contended that understanding how audience members are packaged, marketed and positioned by the media industry will help people understand and become more critical of the television industry. Both Branston (1992) and Potter (2004) noted that, in order to be considered media literate, people have to realize that the media tend to objectify their audiences into measurable, predictable identities in order to predict the success of a show. The definition presented by Hobbs et al. (2006), in a study centered on girls’ understanding of weight loss advertisements, took the logical next step by stressing that media literacy requires the ability to describe the intended audience of a media message. Potter (2004), when outlining his theory of media literacy, took this idea one step further and made the point that, since media industries are guided by a profit motive, they will only turn out messages that will attract considerable audiences. Furthermore, he added that media users need to realize that mass media market to niche audiences.

Not all mass media exist for the purpose of making a profit, however, and several authors argued that whether or not a channel or station intends to make money should affect how a viewer perceives its messages. For instance, Hobbs and Frost (1999) described how the state of Texas introduced a media education curriculum that equipped students to distinguish between those media which sell audiences to advertisers and which do not, and to recognize how media economics can shape a message. Thoman and Jolls (2004), as well as a few others (Buckingham 2003; Lewis & Jhally, 1998), were more direct in their line of reasoning and maintained that much of the world’s mass media were developed as moneymaking enterprises, and that, if one wants to evaluate a message, one has to know if profit is its purpose. In line with this reasoning, Lewis and Jhally concluded that students needed to know about the mainly commercial nature of media institutions in the U.S. because only then would they be able to critically approach the media and appreciate alternative, and possibly more diverse, media forms.

Understanding media ownership patterns can also be considered a part of media literacy. Over two decades ago, Masterman (1983) argued that an awareness of ownership patterns comprises one of the ways that viewers can recognize how and why certain values are embedded in television texts. More recently, Dennis (2004) also observed that adult media literacy assumes an awareness of media ownership and how it influences media content. Both authors, however, noted the danger of oversimplifying the relationship between content and

ownership and warned that statements such as “bigness is bad and diversity is good” (Dennis, p. 209) do not do justice to the nuances of ownership.

In short, scholars consider the economic aspects of media production from a large variety of perspectives, ranging from the packaging of audiences, to the difference between profit and non-profit, to the awareness of ownership patterns. Next, we discuss the political aspects of the production context.

Political aspects. Several definitions of media literacy focus on the need to understand the political influences and allegiances that play a role in shaping the media content turned out by production organizations. Vargas (2006) defined it as the ability to understand “the political economics of global conglomerates” (p. 269). The key aspects of media education as advocated in the U.K., includes an awareness of the political allegiances of the media and how these allegiances could affect media content (Bazalgette, 1992). Aufderheide (1997), in her description of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, noted that media literacy includes an awareness of the bureaucratic and legal constraints of the production of media messages.

In his description of media education projects in various countries, Hart (1998) lamented that few media curricula appear to delve into the relationship between media institutions and the political aspects of society. Recognizing the importance of studying the political aspects of media production, Hobbs (2005a) noted that one of the key aspects of media literacy should be the awareness that media messages have a political purpose. Masterman (1983) argued that the importance of understanding the political values inherent in media messages stems from the fact that most of these values are presented as “go without saying,” i.e., as a part of common sense, or commonly-held ideas. McMahon (2003) referred to this sentiment as the implied nature of many ideologies present in media messages that do affect the meaning in media texts.

Different authors gave varying reasons for the importance of recognizing the presence of political allegiances in the media production context. Masterman (1983) argued that, because of the naturalness of many political ideas present in media messages, people likely accept the values presented to them as truth. Therefore, a more critical attitude toward the media requires recognizing the political values and allegiances present in a message. Thoman and Jolls (2004) explained that “[w]ith democracy at stake almost everywhere around the world, citizens of every country need to be equipped with the ability to determine... ideological spin” (p. 27). On the other hand, according to Alvarado and Boyd-Barrett (1992), if students grasp the political influences on media content, they will be more likely to see how media institutions can be changed for the better.

Moreover, some definitions of media literacy referred to the rules, set up and enforced by the government, that apply to the media. Buckingham (2003), as well as Anderson (1983), alleged that people need to know about the regulations that guide media production. Furthermore, Potter (2004) argued that people should comprehend both the advantages and disadvantages of the regulations that govern the consolidation of media industries. In short, the political aspects of media production refer to a wide array of aspects that can influence media content including legal and bureaucratic restraints, possible political allegiances, and regulations that govern media broadcasts.

The different ways in which media literacy researchers have addressed media production as a dimension of media literacy reveal that, in this respect, media literacy can be defined as knowledge about the selectivity of the producers, the codes and conventions used by the producers, as well as the social and cultural, economic, and political context of media production. Next, we will turn to how media influence on its users has been included in the various definitions of media literacy.

Media Influence on its Users

A third dimension of media production and use indicates that people should be aware of the media's impact on society and individuals. Definitions of media literacy that refer to the influence of media focus on two different levels: societal and individual.

Influence at the Societal Level

Awareness of the fact that the media shape society in many different ways is generally deemed an essential part of media literacy. When talking about "society," a whole array of issues are implied, and in fact, the literature consulted for this overview, and this section in particular, touches upon a large number of issues regarding media influence on society. Some media literacy scholars advocate a general awareness of the influence of the media on society, without any further elaboration. Messaris (1998), for instance, merely mentioned that media literacy includes an awareness of social consequences, without any further specification.

Cultural influences. Other media literacy researchers focus on the media's influence on society in terms of culture. The media and, particularly television, have a "cradle to grave presence" (Vande Berg et al., 2004, p. 221), thus playing an important role in shaping a culture, creating a sense of community and consensus about specific topics, as well as shaping perceptions of societal norms and values. Socialization is essential to the survival of any culture, and most definitions of media literacy include an understanding of the role the media play in this process (e.g., Vargas, 2006). Various media education projects across the world recognize the media's part in crafting cultures and creating consensus as well as a sense of belonging, albeit sometimes in a very generic manner. In Australia, Greenaway (1997) proposed that one of the core concepts of media education involves knowing that the media can influence one's culture. This definition is very general, leaving a great deal of room for interpretation. A similar definition used in Canada sheds a little more light on how Greenaway's definition could be interpreted. Morgan (1998) suggested that an important aim of media education should be to make people aware of how the media shape both culture and values inherent to it. J. A. Brown (1998) concurred when he stated that media literacy included understanding multiple cultural and social roles of the media and the extent to which the media affect values. Vande Berg et al. (2004) further refined the concept of values by asserting that media literacy includes understanding how the media can impact ethical, social, and cultural values.

Impact on political and ideological perspectives. In the field of media literacy, scholars also attend to the influence that the media can have on political and ideological perspectives (e.g., Vande Berg et al., 2004). In her description of the 1992 National Leadership Conference on media literacy, Aufderheide (1997) described media literacy as including the awareness that media messages can have ideological and political implications. The Israeli ministry of education remained more general when it remarked that media literate students should be able to evaluate the role of the media in a democratic society (D. Lemish & P. Lemish, 1997).

Influencing societal activities. Finally, some definitions of media literacy look at "society as a whole" as a collection of activities that define a specific society and/or that are carried out by the majority of the members of that society. Hence, various authors agreed that media literacy includes an awareness of the impact that televised messages could have on society at large; i.e., politics, cultural and artistic activities, and social customs (R. Desmond, 1997; Meyrowitz, 1998; Piette & Giroux, 1997).

In summary, the societal effects that have been described by media literacy scholars as detailed above range from the effects that the media could have on a culture, to how the media help socialize people and create a sense of community, to political perspectives, to how it

could impact a society's customs. Besides societal effects, media literacy researchers have also discussed the impact that the media can have on individuals. We will elaborate on this issue in the next section.

Influence at the Individual Level

Some authors, in their description of what media literacy entails, focused on the impact that mediated messages can have on an individual. This impact has been described in different ways, which will be outlined in the remainder of the section. Various scholars claimed that media literacy included knowing how the media can shape people's view of reality. Others argued that media literacy entailed knowing how the media can affect a person's opinions, feelings, and notion of self. Finally, media literacy also involves an understanding of factors that can mediate the influence that the media can have on people.

Shaping reality. First, various definitions of media literacy suggest that media messages can help to shape people's perception of reality. J. A. Brown (1998) explained that "media experience becomes the framework by which people perceive their world" (p. 51). Rapaczynski et al. (1982) elaborated on this idea by explaining that children need to understand that television "is a source of information (and stereotypes) about other people, countries and occupations" (p. 48), an idea which is echoed by D.G. Singer and J.L. Singer (1983). Thoman and Jolls (2004) noted that if people see how the media shape what they know and understand about the world around them, they will also realize that media content is not a window on reality, but a carefully crafted construction. This observation implies that the ability to understand that the media can influence how one perceives reality is tied to another aspect of media literacy discussed earlier, namely the understanding that the media are a construction.

The need to understand that the media shape one's ideas about reality is especially important when it comes to stereotypes since the media possess the capability to impact how people think about the groups they stereotype (Piette & Giroux, 1997). Thus, several media education programs teach students about the stereotypes presented in the media and their effects on the media users (Anderson, 1983; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1997).

Influencing behavior, ideas and self-concept. Second, various scholars pointed out that media literacy encompasses an awareness of how the media influence feelings, behavior, ideas, and one's self concept. Primack et al. (2006)'s framework for media literacy acknowledges that messages can affect attitudes and behaviors. Further, Messaris (1998), for instance, discussed psychological effects, while Potter (2004), when outlining his theory of media literacy, categorized media effects as either cognitive, attitudinal, emotional, physiological, or behavioral. D. G. Singer, Zuckerman, and J. L. Singer (1980) expanded this list of effects by adding that the media and television, in particular, can also influence with whom and how children identify. In terms of identity-formation, the media play a crucial role especially in the lives of teenagers and young adults since the media seemingly sets standards for looks, weight, and even clothes. Hence, Irving and Berel (2001) argued that media literacy includes the ability to recognize and critically evaluate the ideals put forth by the media as well as the effects that it might have on a person's own self-perception. When successful, according to Irving and Berel, people can "reduce the credibility and persuasive influence of media messages," and, consequently, be less likely to accept the media's beauty ideals (p. 103). An education project developed specifically for Latin-American teenage girls featured the media's impact on how individuals shape their identity in a media education project (Vargas, 2004). This endeavor equipped participants to recognize the process through which they constituted their own intercultural identity as well as the role played by the media in this process. Most media literacy projects discussed so far emphasize the more "obvious" effects, such as body image or emotional or behavioral consequences (e.g., violent programming

causing violent behavior). However, Lloyd-Kolkin et al. (1980) examined an effect that is generally forgotten, namely the ability to discern the influence that media use has on daily life. The media not only impacts topics of conversation but can also influence daily schedules.

Mediating factors. Third, grasping potential media influence the media also entails an understanding of possible mediating factors. As part of his theory of media literacy, Potter (2004) claimed that media literacy encompasses an alertness to factors that decrease or increase the risk of being influenced by the media. As the only media literacy scholar to raise this consideration, Potter argued that media literacy necessitates being able to control these factors and, thus, “reduce the probability of a negative effect occurring well before it has the chance to manifest itself” (p. 85).

Thus, in addition to recognizing production of media content, media literacy entails realizing how the media can impact individuals as well as society as a whole. So far, the literature overview has covered three out of the four relationships between the media, their users and producers. Various media literacy scholars also acknowledge the fourth relationship, which centers on people actively using the media. We explore this dimension of media literacy next.

Handling the Media

Although numerous definitions of media literacy all agree that people should be aware of their active role as media users, the authors differ on which aspect of this role people should know about. Media literate viewers should be able to locate and select media content, manage their media use, and mobilize the media, as well as possess an awareness that media users may differ in how they interpret the media.

Locating and Selecting

This section will demonstrate that a common denominator in many media education programs and media literacy definitions appears to be the ability to find specific information. Scholars often describe it as essential because of the large amounts of information presented to people through the media (see, e.g., Considine, 1997). In his description of his theory of media literacy Potter (2004) went as far as to call the ability to efficiently locate specific information one of the basic skills of media literacy. J.A. Brown (1991) concurred with this idea, and added that this is a skill that needs to be honed and perfected. Concurrent with the idea that simply obtaining information from one source is not sufficient, media education programs stress that people should be able to locate more than one source of information (Anderson, 1983; Considine, 1997) and be able to make a conscious decision about which source they will use (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). When it comes to media literacy research that looks specifically at new media such as the Internet, the ability to locate and select information is key, since these media are much more geared towards searching and browsing. Dennis (2004) noted that people need to be able to find information online and to be aware of the new developments in equipment and other information technologies. Also focusing on new media, Tyner (2003) observed that digital media differ from print media due to the sheer volume and speed with which information can be obtained and, therefore, require special strategies for browsing and searching. She added, that if people are to benefit from the digital media, they must learn how to “creatively...research, and select” (p. 374). In order to be media literate regarding new media such as the Internet, people need access to these new media (e.g., Livingstone, 2004). However, the question has also been raised whether or not access to new media, in fact, guarantees a higher level of digital literacy (Tyner, 2003).

In a few cases, scholars extended this definition to include assessing the quality of the selected information. Determining the quality of media content can be defined in a variety of

ways, and different definitions encompass different evaluation skills. J. A. Brown (1991), for instance, described media education programs with the position that people need to be able to decide if and how information relates to their life. In line with this way of looking at quality assessment, Anderson's (1983) definition of media literacy included reflecting on news stories based on the value that they have regarding a person's purpose for viewing the stories. When discussing how to examine information, some media literacy scholars opt for a more "scientific" approach. Dennis (2004) referred to it as "evaluating their sources, mode of presentation, accuracy and interpretation" (p. 209), while Considine (1997) argued that media literate people should be able to separate "policy from personality, issue from image" (p. 260). A third way in which people should be able to assess the quality of the received information is by checking multiple sources, a notion so generally accepted within the field of media literacy that it was included in the key concepts of media literacy as proposed by the Center for Media Literacy (Thoman, 1999). Potter (2004), when outlining his theory of media literacy also discussed the ability to compare and contrast different sources of information, a skill he referred to as "grouping". Comparing sources can be as simple as obtaining information through television news and then comparing it to information obtained elsewhere (Vooijs & van der Voort, 1990). However, according to Dennis, an awareness of different sources of information and the ability to use them if necessary to obtain a greater understanding of certain issues is paramount to critical viewing. Tyner (2003) extended this notion to the new media. Because of the sheer amount of information and the speed with which information can be provided online, Tyner argued that viewers require particular strategies when evaluating online content and "verifying the authenticity of the sources, and placing specific content within the context of other information sources" (p. 373).

In short, locating and selecting refers to people's ability to find information and assess its value. Many media literacy scholars link this ability with managing media use, which we discuss in the next section.

Managing Media Use

Numerous media literacy scholars characterize an awareness of when one uses the media as part of media literacy. In his summary of critical viewing programs, J. A. Brown (2001) mentioned that some programs focus on people's patterns of media use. Lloyd-Kolkin et al. (1980) were more specific when they stated that media literacy should entail the ability to evaluate one's media use, i.e., to log when one uses the media and compare one's media use to that of others. Logging media use comprises a recurrent theme for several media education programs. For instance, according to some authors, media literacy training included teaching people to evaluate their own television viewing patterns (e.g., asking viewers to assess patterns in their media use during one week) Kline (2005) instructed children to self-monitor and self-report television, videotape, and videogame use. Similarly, J. A. Brown (1991) described a media education program in which students created pre-planned viewing schedules. Besides raising awareness regarding media use, such programs also render people more sensitive regarding the extent of their exposure to the media, i.e., for how long they use the media during a given period of time.

Furthermore, scholars contend that people's ability to manage their use of the media in a well-considered manner constitutes a part of media literacy. Vooijs and van der Voort (1990) summarized this principle when they claimed that critical viewing skills included teaching the student "strategies for the management of the duration of viewing and program choices" (p. 545). Further, D.G. Singer and J.L. Singer (1983) described a media education curriculum where one of the goals was to teach children how to control their viewing habits. This aspect of media literacy can have very practical uses. Kline (2005) detailed how media education can be employed to curb child obesity by teaching children how to limit their use of

the media, since media consumption has been shown to increase the risk of unhealthy eating habits and a sedentary lifestyle. Other authors included the ability to create a “media use schedule” in their definition of media literacy; i.e., the ability to make decisions about what to watch on television before turning it on (Hobbs, 1998a; Vooijs & van der Voort, 1989). Managing media use can also be extended to planning leisure time in general. In a Swiss media education program (Desimoni, 1992), students learn to better organize their leisure time “through a greater freedom of decision about the proportion of time to be devoted to the media” (p. 34). Kline summarized a pilot study in Vancouver that encouraged children to reflect on their media use and consider alternative ways of leisure. Selecting higher quality programs also contributes to managing media use (J. A. Brown, 1991; Vooijs & van der Voort, 1989), although these authors did not describe what would constitute a “higher quality.”

An awareness of the motives and purposes that provide the incentive for media use also impacts media literacy. According to Anderson (1983), scholars can no longer view media users as passive, and media education curricula have to be more oriented towards the individual and their needs. In Switzerland, for instance, media education includes rendering students aware why they use the media (Desimoni, 1992). Additionally, J. A. Brown (1991) described how some media education programs included knowing about motives and purposes for attending to television programs as well as ways of evaluating how one’s motives can shape sense-making of media content (see also McMahan, 2003). Piette and Giroux (1997) elaborated on this idea by adding that if people are more aware of how and why their own television viewing occurs, they are better able to evaluate media content in terms of their expectations and needs.

After discussing the different aspects of media literacy that focus on how, when, and why people use the media, in the next section, we describe two other aspects of handling the media; namely the ability to mobilize the media and the ability to interpret media content.

The Ability to Mobilize the Media

Some definitions of media literacy include a more activist aspect of dealing with the media; they refer to taking action in regard to specific media content but also to attracting media attention. This becomes apparent in several definitions of media literacy. As Means Coleman (2003) noted “[T]he principal goals of media education are to create media consumers who...work to influence and inform media” (p. 413). In her description of media literacy, Hobbs (1998a, 2005a) underscored the ability to use the media to attract press interest, build coalitions, shape policy decision making and change political practices in regard to certain social issues. Rapaczynski et al. (1982) specifically stressed the ability to influence networks, producers, and television stations. Further, Vande Berg et al. (2004) emphasized that becoming media literate entailed sharing one’s insights regarding the meanings of television content with policy makers, program creators, and industry decision makers (p. 222). Although this aspect of handling the media receives less attention from media literacy scholars than the others, mobilizing the media constitutes an essential part of the relationship between the media and the user since it is the sole one which highlights user agency in terms of influencing the media, instead of vice versa.

Interpreting Media Content

Definitions of media literacy also include an awareness of how audiences interpret media content. Branston (1992) observed that media literacy must focus on both textual analysis and audiences. Many of those same definitions also claim that people need to understand how and why other people may interpret the same message differently, as will become apparent in this next section.

First, some descriptions of media literacy which concentrate on the extent to which people understand the process through which they give meaning to media content. Media messages do not contain fixed meanings that are simply copied by media users, and media literacy includes the awareness that audiences play an active role in creating meaning (Quin, 2003). Thoman (1999), in her description of the key concepts of media literacy as advocated by the Center for Media Literacy, further specified this idea by claiming that media literacy includes asking as many questions about media content as possible. Besides just questioning possible meanings, Bazalgette (1992) argued that media literacy also involves an awareness of how people construct meaning from media texts (see also Aufderheide, 1992).

Individual interpretations of media messages depends on a variety of factors. In their project on teenage girls' and weight loss advertising, Hobbs et al. (2006) asserted that media literacy requires understanding how "people make interpretations of media messages based on their prior knowledge and life experience" (p. 721). Furthermore, in Australia, Quin and McMahon (1997) argued that, although textual analysis is essential to media literacy, it will not completely reveal how the user interprets media content, and, therefore, people need to learn that their positions, attitudes, and values influence the meaning they make of the texts. J. A. Brown (2001) elaborated, arguing that interpretation depends on people's individual cognitive processing, which includes psychological and affective considerations, as well as selective perception and interpretation. In short, this aspect of media literacy centers on media users understanding their own complex role as receivers of messages and creators of meaning (Desimoni, 1992).

Second, understanding that people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds may interpret the same media message differently is another aspect of media literacy. In his description of the key aspects of media education in the U.K., Bazalgette asserted that "different classes, races, ages, cultural backgrounds, and personal histories can all affect the interpretation of texts and the kinds of pleasures people may derive from them" (1992, p. 215). Thoman (1999) echoed that "no two people see the same movie" (p. 51), a notion which can also be found in the framework for media literacy presented by Primack et al. (2006).

Several media literacy projects elaborated on why it is important to understand that different people may have different interpretations of the same content. For example, Thoman and Jolls (2004) argued that this kind of knowledge enhances intercultural respect and understanding. Quin and McMahon (1997) noted that students need to understand that audiences are not passive recipients of media messages; instead, they each bring their own social positions, race, gender, and age to bear upon their interpretation of the media. This understanding is essential if they desire to "make comparisons and judgments about their own and wider community values" (p. 313). Other media literacy researchers maintained that people who are aware that different people may interpret the same message differently increase their critical attitude toward the media. Masterman (1997) alleged that if people understand how audiences respond to texts, they gain a greater critical autonomy when it comes to media content. The media education program developed by WNET in the early 1980s also taught its students to survey the uses that different people have for the media so that students could better "respond autonomously to messages emanating from the television and evaluate them in terms of their own needs and expectations" (Piette & Giroux, 1997, p. 112).

This concludes the description of the aspects that constitute the arrow concerned with handling the media. How do the findings from this section contribute to the main question of this chapter: how is media literacy defined? Within this dimension of media literacy, we have categorized the ability to locate and select the media, the ability to mobilize and interpret media content, which can be added to the definition of media literacy. In the next section, we will discuss the key findings from our overview, as well as suggestions for future research.

Conclusion and Discussion

The large variety of definitions outlined in this chapter clearly indicates the richness of the field and the concept of media literacy. This chapter comprises the first attempt to create a schematic representation to categorize the realm of media literacy. Since media literacy has been widely identified as the knowledge of media use and production, it seemed a logical step to use a schematic representation of media use and production to review and categorize existing definitions of media literacy. All of the literature that was examined for this review could be placed into one or more of the four arrows that make up the schematic representation. According to this literature review, media literacy entails the awareness of the different aspects of the production of media content, the influence of the media on its users and its producers, and the way in which users deal with the media. Media literacy encompasses critical attitudes and/or behaviors toward the media, as well as any resulting abilities regarding the media that result from such awareness. The categorization constructed in this chapter allows for drawing the following conclusions.

Key Findings

Considering that various overviews of the media literacy field already exist, what conclusions can be drawn from this literature review regarding the field of media literacy as well as the wider arena of communication studies?

First, this literature review indicates that media literacy research has been utilized in a wide variety of fields and areas of the communication discipline. It originated in the fields of pedagogy, teaching, and learning, where in educational contexts, the cultivation of critical thinking was propagated in general. From there, it spread to more diverse fields, including health communication (e.g., Livingstone & Helsper, 2006), advertising (e.g., S. Feshbach, N. D. Feshbach, & Cohen, 1982; Hobbs et al., 2006), political communication (e.g., Court & Criticos, 1998), and intercultural communication (e.g., Vargas, 2006). Therefore, media literacy certainly applies to fields far beyond the realm of education.

Second, this review reveals that every aspect of the schematic representation of media use and production was already considered a part of media literacy some 20 years ago. Thus, the essence of how experts define media literacy has changed very little over the years. Notably, a large majority of media literacy researchers seem to build on each other's work, incorporating previously developed ideas into newly phrased definitions. For example, Primack et al.'s (2006) definition of media literacy was based on the two definitions developed by Thoman (1999) and Bazalgette (1992). Moreover, the field of media literacy has a very practical orientation, and, thus, most research is concerned with the concrete applicability of the concept, i.e., how can media literacy be taught in different settings and with different topics, as opposed to developing new ways to define media literacy. However, recently, Potter (2004) added new insights regarding what it takes for a person to be deemed media literate. Besides discussing the awareness of the different aspects of the production and reception of the media, as outlined above, Potter contributed the concept of "personal locus" to the realm of media literacy. This concept refers to people's personal ability and commitment to displaying media literate behavior. Potter argued that media literacy requires personal ability, awareness of, and motivation to control exposures to the media and media effects. Instead of adopting the protectionist stance implicit to some media education programs, Potter returned the responsibility of becoming a critical user to media users themselves and even supplied them with activities to improve their personal locus. This line

of thinking could alter current media education programs to integrate an emphasis on “what am I going to do with this in my life” which could have interesting effects as far as critical viewing abilities are concerned.

Third, the majority of the definitions of media literacy focus on the knowledge that people need to have about media use and production (e.g., Bazalgette, 1992). In some cases, such as the production of media messages or the ability to mobilize the media, researchers explicitly refer to skills that people need to possess (e.g., Rapaczynski et al., 1982), but these are the only aspects of media literacy where skills are discussed. It would appear that most media literacy scholars assume that knowledge forms the starting point for any kind of media literacy skills, which would explain why most definitions of media literacy focus on knowledge.

Fourth, the schematic representation specifies which areas of media use and production are deemed important by media literacy scholars and which have received little attention, thus also shedding light on how communication is represented within media literacy research. This literature review revealed, for instance, that the vast majority of media literacy scholars consider understanding the production of media messages to be an essential aspect of media literacy (e.g., Bazalgette, 1992; Thoman, 1999). Furthermore, the vast majority of media education programs address it as well (e.g., Covington, 2004). The definitions of media literacy address a wide array of production-related issues, ranging from the practical side of media production (e.g., Masterman, 1983; Tyner, 2003) to the more abstract discussion about the different codes in a message and their possible meanings (e.g., Aufderheide, 1997). Thus, the areas within communication where these issues were first investigated are very well represented in the media literacy arena. Conversely, although within the communication discipline, just as much attention has been paid to how people deal with the media (e.g., the uses and gratifications approach and the sense-making theory), the arrow that focuses on how people handle the media receives relatively little attention from media literacy scholars. This finding could be attributed to the fact that many media literacy definitions arise from a practice-oriented context, i.e., they are rooted in an educational environment. Teaching students how to deal with the media in a constructive manner and to understand their own interpretation processes is a great deal more complicated than teaching them about the production or influence of the media. The latter can occur in a fairly simple classroom setting where the teacher dispenses information, and the students take it in. Learning how to handle the media, however, requires a more diverse approach, incorporating practical activities such as keeping media diaries, exploring how to gain media attention, and investigating one’s own interpretations of media content. These activities are less common in an educational setting, which could be why the media literacy literature mentions this aspect of media literacy less often.

Moreover, scholars have completely ignored the influence that the media can have on media producers. The field of studies that focus on the producers as media-users (e.g., Breed, 1955; MacManus, 1994) is excluded from all media literacy definitions; no author points out that producers are not isolated from the media surrounding them but, instead, influenced by them in various ways. Considering the heavy focus that many definitions place on the creation of media content, this gap is unexpected; why don’t scholars also recognize the influence that the media have on producers? One possible explanation for this omission could be that scholars implicitly include it as part of the context in which the media messages are created.

Furthermore, this chapter reveals that the application of media literacy has shifted over the past few years, with a greater emphasis on health-related issues. A large number of studies have explored the role that media literacy can play in educational programs that focus on curbing obesity, smoking, and improving people’s body image (e.g., Hobbs et al., 2006; Irving & Berel, 2001; Kline, 2005; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006; Primack et al., 2006;

Wilksch et al., 2006). When teaching about health issues and the media, these studies mainly aim to teach about the possible influence of the media (e.g., Irving & Berel, 2006; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006). This approach would seem to make the role of the arrow that focuses on the influence of the media on the users much more pivotal. However, we have not yet observed a shift in the definition of media literacy. This finding could mainly be attributed to the fact that these studies continue to place a heavy emphasis on understanding how media messages are created as an essential step in improving the health media literacy of the participants. For instance, in their study into media literacy and smoking, Primack et al. (2006) included a definition of media literacy that also addressed understanding how media messages are constructed (see also Hobbs et al., 2006).

Suggestions for Future Research

This chapter raises three points for the media literacy research agenda. The first issue that could be addressed by media literacy scholars is the absence of any literature on the influence that the media has on the producers of media content. Research could explore how this line of influence could be further defined and translated into knowledge that people should possess. Furthermore, scholars could examine how this aspect of media literacy could be introduced into the classroom.

A second issue raised by this literature review involves the possibility of developing a measurement instrument for media literacy. The development of a schematic representation of media production and use that encompasses and has been further specified by existing definitions of media literacy may be regarded as a first step on the way to developing an instrument to measure media literacy. The majority of the prior attempts at measuring media literacy were always related to specific media education programs and their effectiveness (e.g., Hobbs et al., 2006; Hobbs & Frost, 1999; Primack et al., 2006; Vooijs & van der Voort, 1990), while this schematic representation opens up the opportunity of measuring media literacy independent of any program or curriculum. Additionally, the aspects that make up the four arrows reflect what media literacy scholars over the years have defined as media literacy, and using them to develop an instrument to measure media literacy means this measure will reflect the general opinion of what media literacy should entail.

A final area that requires further research is the intersection of media literacy and internet-based technologies, or new media. These new media are becoming increasingly dominant, especially in young people's lives; therefore, if media literacy research is to remain up to date and useful, it should address the new media. Currently, a great deal of literature that addresses new media and media literacy focuses on how new media can be used in different education projects, for instance, in multicultural education projects (e.g., Hammer & Kellner, 2000) and in health education (e.g., Shah, George, & Himburg, 1999; Wyatt, Henwood, Hart, & Smith, 2005). Some research also looks into the role that new media play in people's lives (e.g., Livingstone, 2006). As evidenced by the overview, very few researchers actually pursue how media literacy should be (re)defined regarding the new media. Livingstone (2004) is the only one to discuss how the traditional concept of media literacy as developed by the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy fits new media. She used the four tenets of this definition (access, analyze, evaluate, and produce) to create a research agenda for Internet-based technologies and media literacy. This very interesting undertaking should be further developed. Research should establish what people need to know or be able to do in order to approach the new media in a critical manner and how this knowledge and/or these abilities could be translated into an education program.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, this literature overview has provided a conceptual structure, in the shape of a schematic representation, through which one can view the wide array of ideas and opinions about media literacy. While providing insight into how the field of media literacy has been defined, this chapter also offers insight into how developments in this field have benefited other areas of communication research.

Note

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Appendix 1. Overview of which authors addresses which aspects of media literacy.

Aspect of media literacy	Author
<i>Media Influence on Producers</i>	Quin, 2003
<i>Production of Media Content</i>	
General Discussion	<p><i>Media is a construction</i> Aufderheide, 1997; Bazalgette, 1992; Brookfield, 1987; Court and Criticos, 1998; Criticos, 1997; Greenaway, 1997; Hobbs, 1997, 1998b, 1998c, 2005a; D. Lemish and P. Lemish, 1997; Masterman 1997, 1998; Morgan, 1998; Scharrer, 2003; Thoman, 1999; Thoman & Jolls, 2004;</p> <p><i>Ability to produce media content</i> Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Aufderheide, 1997; Bazalgette, 1992; Brookfield, 1986; Collins, 1998; Davison, 1992; Dennis, 2004; Desimoni, 1992; Gaudard & Theveniaut, 1992; Hart, 1998; Hobbs, 1998a, 1998c, 2005a; Ketzer et al., 1989; D. Lemish and P. Lemish, 1997; Livingstone, 2003; Lund, 1998; Minkkinen, 1978; Quin, 2003; Scheibe, 2004; Stafford, 1990; Thoman & Jolls, 2004; Tufte, 1992; Tyner, 2003; Vande Berg et al., 2004; Vargas, 2006</p>
Professional Activities	Buckingham, 2003; Covington, 2004
Producer Selectivity	Alvermann, 2004; Brookfield, 1986; J. A. Brown, 1991; Collins, 1998; Considine, 1997; Covington, 2004; Desimoni, 1992; Greenaway, 1997; Hobbs, 2005a, 2005b; Hobbs et al., 2006; D. Lemish and P. Lemish, 1997; Livingstone, 2003; Lloyd-Kolkin et al., 1980; Masterman, 1983; Potter, 2004; Primack et al., 2006; Thoman, 1999; Thoman & Jolls, 2004; Tufte, 1992; Vooijs & van der Voort, 1990.

Anderson, 1983; Aufderheide, 1997; Bazalgette, 1992; Court & Criticos, 1998; J. D. Desmond & Jeffries-Fox, 1983; Feshbach et al., 1982; Hobbs, 2004; Ketzer, Swinkels, & Vooijs, 1989; D. Lemish and P. Lemish, 1997; Livingstone & Helsper, 2006; Primack et al., 2006; Thoman, 1999

Production procedures

Anderson, 1983; Bazalgette, 1992, 1997; Brookfield, 1986; J. A. Brown, 1991, 2001; Buckingham, 1990, 1993, 1998, 2003; Buckingham, Fraser, & Mayman, 1990; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1997; Collins, 1998; Considine, 1997; Davies, 1997; Davison, 1992; Desimoni, 1992; Gray, 2005; Greenaway, 1997; Hobbs, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2005a; Hobbs et al., 2006; Hobbs & Frost, 1999; Hobbs, Frost, Davis, & Stauffer, 1988; Livingstone, 2003; Lloyd-Kolkin et al., 1980; Masterman, 1983, 1997, 1998; McClure, 1997; McMahan, 2003; Messaris, 1998; Meyrowitz, 1998; Piette & Giroux, 1997; Potter, 2004; Quin & McMahan, 1997; Rapaczynski et al., 1982; Scheibe, 2004; D. G. Singer et al., 1980; D. G. Singer & J.L. Singer, 1983; J.L. Singer & D.G. Singer, 1983; Swinkels, 1992; Thoman, 1999; Thoman & Jolls, 2004; Vande Berg et al., 2004; Vooijs & van der Voort, 1989, 1990; Zetl, 1998

Dramatic and/or narrative codes

Abelman & Courtright, 1983; Anderson, 1983; Bazalgette, 1992; Brookfield, 1986; Brown, 1991, 2001; Buckingham, 1990, 1993, 1998, 2003; Buckingham et al., 1990; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1997; Collins, 1998; Considine, 1997; Court and Criticos, 1998; Davies, 1997; Desimoni, 1992; Desmond, 1997; Dorr, Browne Graves & Phelps, 1980; Greenaway, 1997; Hobbs, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2005a; Hobbs et al., 2006; Hobbs & Frost, 1999; Hobbs et al., 1988; Ketzer, Swinkels and Vooijs, 1989; Livingstone, 2003; Lloyd-Kolkin, et al., 1980; Masterman, 1983, 1997; McClure, 1997; McMahan, 2003; Meyrowitz, 1998; Piette & Giroux, 1997; Potter, 2004; Quin & McMahan, 1997; Rapaczynski et al., 1982;

	Roberts, Christenson, Gibson, Mooser, & Goldberg, 1980; D.G.Singer & J. L. Singer, 1983; D. G. Singer et al., 1980; J. L. Singer & D.G. Singer, 1983; Swinkels, 1992; Vande Berg et al., 2004; Zetl, 1998
Production Context	
General Discussion	J. A. Brown, 2001; Covington, 2004; D. Lemish & P. Lemish, 1997
Social and cultural aspects	Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett, 1992; Alvermann, 2004; Anderson, 1983; Bazalgette, 1997; J. A. Brown, 1991, 1998, 2001; Buckingham, 1993, 2003; Considine, 1997; Desimoni, 1992; Hart, 1998; Hobbs, 1998a, 1998c, 2005a; D. Lemish & P. Lemish, 1997; Lewis & Jhally, 1998; Livingstone, 2003; Masterman, 1983; McMahan, 2003; Meyrowitz, 1998; Scheibe, 2004; Thoman & Jolls, 2004; Vande Berg et al., 2004
Economic aspects	Anderson, 1983; Aufderheide, 1997; Bazalgette, 1992, 1997; Branston, 1992; J. A. Brown, 1991, 1998; Buckingham, 1993, 2003; Dennis, 2004; Desimoni, 1992; J. D. Desmond & Jeffries-Fox, 1983; Dorr et al., 1980; Hart, 1998; Hobbs, 2005a; Hobbs and Frost, 1999; Hobbs et al., 2006; Lewis and Jhally, 1998; Livingstone, 2003; Masterman, 1983, 1998; McMahan, 2003; Messaris, 1998; Meyrowitz, 1998; Piette & Giroux, 1997; Potter, 2004; Primack et al. 2006; Rapaczynski et al., 1982; Thoman, 1999; Vande Berg et al., 2004; Vargas, 2006
Political aspects	Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett, 1992; Anderson, 1983; Aufderheide, 1997; Bazalgette, 1992; J. A. Brown, 1998; Buckingham, 1993, 2003; Hart, 1998; Hobbs, 2005a; Hobbs et al., 2006; Masterman, 1983; McMahan, 2003; Meyrowitz, 1998; Potter, 2004; Thoman & Jolls, 2004; Vande Berg et al., 2004; Vargas, 2006

<i>Media Influence On Its Users</i>	
Influence at Societal Level	Aufderheide, 1997; J. A. Brown, 1991, 1998; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1997; R. Desmond, 1997; Greenaway, 1997; D. Lemish and P. Lemish, 1997; Masterman, 1997; Messaris, 1998; Meyrowitz, 1998; Morgan, 1998; Piette & Giroux, 1997; Vande

	Berg et al., 2004; Vargas, 2006
Influence at the Individual Level	<p><i>Media shape people's perception of reality</i> Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Anderson, 1983; J. A. Brown, 1998; Buckingham, 2003; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1997; R. Desmond, 1997; Piette & Giroux, 1997; Rapaczynski et al., 1982; D. G. Singer & J. L. Singer, 1983; Swinkels, 1992; Thoman & Jolls, 2004</p> <p><i>Media influence feelings, behavior, self-concept</i> Anderson, 1983; J. A. Brown, 1991; Buckingham, 2003; R. Desmond, 1997; Irving & Berel, 2001; Lloyd-Kolkin et al., 1980; Messaris, 1998; Potter, 2004; Primack et al., 2006; Rapaczynski et al., 1982; Scharrer, 2003; D. G. Singer et al., 1980; J. L. Singer & D. G. Singer, 1983; Vargas, 2006</p> <p><i>Factors that mediate media influence</i> Potter, 2004</p>
<i>Handling the Media</i>	
Locating and Selecting	<p><i>Finding and selecting information</i> Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Anderson, 1983; J. A. Brown, 1991, 1998, 2001; Buckingham, 1993, 2003; Considine, 1997; Dennis, 2004; Hobbs, 1997, 1998a; Livingstone, 2004; Lloyd-Kolkin et al. 1980; McClure, 1997; Meyrowitz, 1998; Potter, 2004; Scheibe, 2004; Thoman, 1999; Tyner, 2004; Vooijs & Van der Voort, 1990</p> <p><i>Assessing quality of selected information</i> Anderson, 1983; Aufderheide, 1997; Considine, 1997; Covington, 2004; Dennis, 2004; Hobbs, 1997, 1998a; Potter, 2004; Thoman, 1999; Tyner, 2003.</p>
Managing Media Use	<p><i>Awareness when one uses the media</i> Anderson, 1983; Branston, 1992; J. A. Brown, 1991, 1998; R. Desmond, 1997; Hobbs, 1998a, 2005a; Hobbs & Frost, 1999; Kline, 2005; Lloyd-Kolkin et al., 1980; Masterman, 1997; McMahan, 2003; Piette & Giroux, 1997; Rapaczynski, 1982; D. G. Singer & J. L. Singer, 1983; D. G. Singer et al., 1980; Vargas, 2006; Vooijs & van der</p>

Voort, 1989

Managing media use in well-considered manner

Anderson, 1983; J. A. Brown, 1991; Desimoni, 1992; Hobbs, 1998a; Kline, 2005; Rapaczynski et al., 1982; D. G. Singer & J. L. Singer, 1983; D. G. Singer et al. 1980; J. L. Singer & D. G. Singer, 1983; Vooijs & van der Voort, 1989, 1990

Awareness of motives and purposes

Anderson, 1983; J. A. Brown, 1991, 2001; Desimoni, 1992; McMahon, 2003; Piette & Giroux, 1997; Vooijs & van der Voort, 1990

The Ability to Mobilize the Media

J. A. Brown, 1991, 1998; Criticos, 1997; Hobbs, 1998a, 2005a; Means Coleman, 2003; Rapaczynski et al. 1982; D. G. Singer & J. L. Singer, 1983; D. G. Singer et al., 1980; Vande Berg et al., 2004

Interpreting Media Content
General Discussion

Branston, 1992

Understand process of meaning-giving

Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett, 1992; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Anderson, 1983; Aufderheide, 1992; Bazalgette, 1992; Bouwman, 1989; J. A. Brown, 1991, 1998, 2001; Buckingham, 1993, 1998, 2003; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1997; Davies, 1997; Desimoni, 1992; R. Desmond, 1997; Hobbs, 1998c; Hobbs et al., 2006; Masterman, 1983; McClure, 1997; McMahon, 2003; Quin, 2003; Quin & McMahon, 1997; Thoman, 1999; Thoman & Jolls, 2004; Zetl, 1998

Different people – different interpretations

Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett, 1992; Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Bazalgette, 1992; Branston, 1992; J. A. Brown, 1991, 1998; Buckingham, 1990, 1993, 1998, 2003; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1997; Considine, 1997; Criticos, 1997; Dorr et al., 1980; Greenaway, 1997; Hobbs, 1998a, 2005a; Hobbs et al., 2006; Masterman, 1983, 1997; Meyrowitz, 1998; Piette & Giroux, 1997; Primack et al., 2006; Quin &

McMahon, 1997; Swinkels, 1992; Thoman,
1999; Thoman & Jolls, 2004; Vande Berg et
al., 2004
