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## Chapter Thirteen

# Situating Media Literacy in the Changing Media Environment

## Critical Insights from European Research on Audiences

Sonia Livingstone, Christine W. Wijnen, Tao Papaioannou, Conceição Costa and María del Mar Grandío

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### 1. Media Literacy and Media Audiences

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This chapter argues that, as the media and information environment becomes an ever more significant means through which people structure their lives, it is increasingly important that they understand the complex nature of that media environment. Media-literate individuals, living within in a media-literate society, are surely desirable. To put it another way, media illiteracy is fast becoming as problematic as traditional print illiteracy. However, the costs to individuals or groups, and to society as a whole, of not being able to ‘read and write’ in a digitally mediated environment are only now rising up the policy agenda. The increasing importance of media literacy, as media themselves become ever more embedded in our learning, work and leisure, is generating a renewed effort to define, measure and promote media literacy internationally (Celot and Tornero 2010; Frau-Meigs and Torrent 2009; Hobbs 2010).

While the fast pace of technological change sets its own challenges for research and policy, it should also be recognised that much about the present, digital age, can still be learned regarding the pedagogy of representation, critical interpretation and power from the longer history of literacy, whether audio-visual, print-based oral. Several academic traditions have examined the kinds of understanding of media required of the public, often developing similar ideas in parallel (Livingstone, van Couvering and Thumim 2008). These include the fields of education (typically

charged with teaching media literacy and / or information and communication technology [ICT] skills in schools and colleges) and information and library sciences (expected to ensure information and digital skills for a competitive workforce). However, our primary reference in this chapter is a third tradition, that of media and communication studies. This draws on both the humanities and social sciences to offer a developed critique of media forms and power, including an analysis of the audience's positioning, understanding and practices concerning media and communications. All of these approaches to media literacy also vary depending on the cultural, pedagogic and labour market contexts of different countries and cultures. For these and other reasons, there is also considerable variability in the terms used to label the phenomenon itself—media, digital, information, multimodal or network literacy, and so forth, resulting in equally notable debates over the nature and consequences of media literacy (Hobbs 1998, 2008).

It seems that a strategic settlement regarding the concept of digital literacy is now emerging to build consensus for the policy agenda (Drotner 2010; Sefton-Green, Erstad and Nixon 2009). Yet this is impeded by the long-standing dilemma bifurcating media literacy research, namely, the question of its purpose (Buckingham 1998). Is the primary purpose of media literacy to enable people to defend themselves against the 'big bad media,' arming them with critical skills so they can recognise and defuse the power of persuasive, manipulative or exploitative media? From this perspective, the more media literacy, the less media influence, or even, media use (Valkenburg 2004). Alternatively, is its purpose to empower people to participate in a mediated world providing them with the analytic and creative resources they require to benefit from the wealth of ideas and inventiveness that the media can offer? From this perspective, the more media literacy, the better the media use—more diverse, thoughtful and engaged (e.g., Drotner 2008; Jenkins 2006).

Among researchers of media audiences, both of these contrasting approaches have long been pursued, although problematically the former conjures an image of a childish or vulnerable audience in need of protection, while the latter tends to celebrate, perhaps naively, an empowered audience (as in the rhetoric over "digital natives"; see Helsper and Eynon 2010), well able to pursue its own interests. Treading a careful line between these extremes is the notion of "audience as critic" (cf. Himmelweit, Swift and Jaeger 1980). Here audience research explicitly extends the longer tradition of print literacy to the audiovisual, and now the digital age, by examining how people recognise, contextualise and evaluate the conventionalised and constructed nature of media texts and genres (Livingstone 2009), whether those texts are normatively valued (as is typical for high culture) or deplored (commonly, much of popular or mass culture). Research examples include Liebes and Katz's (1990) identification of critical and ludic (as well as referential) viewers of the prime-time soap opera *Dallas*, as well as the critically engaged viewers of talk shows (Livingstone and Lunt 1994) and reality television (Hill 2004). Morley's (1980, 1992) negotiated and oppositional viewers, while identified in terms of their ideological relation to the television text, also illustrate the point.

As we extend our analysis of the audience's critical responses to mass communication to examine their activities in the digital, networked age (Livingstone 2004), key theoretical insights can be retained and updated. Firstly, audience interpretation emerges from the interaction between

audiences and texts or technologies (as theorised via the metaphor of ‘text and reader’). This involves considerable effort after meaning on the part of media audiences and users, although the institutional and technological power of the media to shape these meanings remains considerable in the digital age. Consequently, secondly, audiences (including digital media users) cannot make anything they will of a text (as sometimes supposed of mass media) and nor can they simply treat the text as a given, all-determining in its meaning, a ‘window on the world’ (as sometimes supposed of mass but also new media). This insight still poses challenges for the partially determining, partially open nature of online and digital interfaces that are still little understood. For example, what are the Web 2.0 equivalents of traditional textual genres (e.g., news or soap opera), with their “preferred readings” (Hall 1973) and how do users develop normative expectations of these (Kress 2003)? Beyond textual determinations or affordances, audience research also addresses the importance of social determinations (Morley 1992). Hence, contrary to the common misreading of audience research as celebrating an individual free to interpret texts in any way, audience research has, thirdly, established the shaping role of domestic and social contexts of media use. These contexts are significant not only for an individual approaching a digital text, but also in terms of the reproduction or renegotiation of the social norms and stratifications that sustain interpretative communities (Radway 1988). Such interpretative communities may be generative as well as conservative, enabling collective participation in media processes that may (or may not) serve the interests of the community and that may be accepted or contested by different parts of the community (Cammaerts and Carpentier 2006).

Note that emphasising the communal or social nature of media literacy challenges the common but flawed assumption that media or digital literacy can be understood in purely individual terms—as a skill, for instance (Hartley 2002). Also important is the understanding that linking the social and textual determinations helps to complete the wider circuit of culture, now heavily mediated, of which literacy is one key element in the articulation of the different moments of meaning-making (Johnson 1986). So, in making the bridge between the media literacy required for established and for new environments, we recognise that audiences have not dramatically transformed from passive to active around the turn of the 21st century—rather, they have always been actively interpretative, although arguably not so interactive or participatory. However, the changing media environment is undoubtedly transforming the literacy requirements placed on audiences, as this chapter seeks to address.

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## 2. Media Literacy Matters

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Let us now position the above audience-centred account of media literacy within the longer tradition of analysing literacy as a multidimensional phenomenon. In the 19th century, the English term ‘literature’ exclusively referred to the standards of high culture. Thus the term ‘literary’ meant being well educated in the sense of knowing the works found within the high culture canon. With the emergence of a mass public who could read and write, but who lacked cultural capital (that is,

they were not educated in high culture; see Bourdieu 1979), a new term was needed and so the word 'literacy' was introduced to describe the skills of reading and writing (Livingstone 2009). In the 20th century, the development of the media sector and the multiplication of textual forms led to the proliferation of terms to describe different elements of literacy. Buckingham (2007) observes that these are based on the assumption that older and newer media operate with different 'languages' or 'grammars,' each of which must be known to communicate successfully (that is, 'to read and write') in the context of a specific medium or domain of knowledge.

The different elements of literacy have been distinguished in several ways. Tyner (1998) distinguishes tool literacies that encompass technical and instrumental skills from literacies of representation that refer to the ability to understand and critically reflect on media power and processes. Focused on the latter, more advanced skills, Fessler and Swertz (2010) distinguish information literacy (the ability to find and evaluate information, to address and to communicate issues), visual literacy (enjoying and understanding visual culture, aesthetics) and media literacy (critical reflection on all media texts, using media to express oneself) as three main literacies of representation. Further, given recent developments in the media sector, they regard digital literacy (the ability to navigate in hypertextual and convergent media) as an upgrade of information literacy; similarly, they see multimedia literacy (understanding multimedia texts and communicating in a convergent and cross-media environment) as a further development and integration of information and media literacy; and last, they regard multimodal literacy (understanding as well as creative and intercontextual use / production of various texts) as a further development of visual literacy.

In the Germanic tradition, the effort to synthesise a common approach to media literacy centres on the concept of media competence (*Medienkompetenz*). Although *Medienkompetenz* is often translated as 'media literacy,' the theoretical origin of this concept is different. Originally the term competence comes from biology and stands for the ability of embryonic cells to react to certain stimuli (Baacke 1973/1980). Chomsky brought this term into the linguistic and social sciences (Sutter and Charlton 2002), arguing that humans are competent because they are able to produce an infinite number of sentences by referring to inherited language rules. Chomsky's notion of competence became increasingly important through the 1960s and 1970s in German social science discourse. For example, Habermas (1984) defined communicative competence as the ability to communicate with others. Baacke (1973/1980) referred to both Chomsky and Habermas in extending the notion to the context of media and media education, with media competence for him being part of communicative competence. In the last 20 years, the term 'media competence' has been employed within various societal and academic discourses (Gapski 2001), with most current definitions drawing on Baacke's approach (Wijnen 2008). He identifies four elements of media competence: media critique, including both the ability to critically analyse media and media content and that of reflecting on one's personal media use; knowledge about media and the media system; use of media, including both media reception and interactive participation through media; and the ability to produce creative and innovative media content (Baacke 1999). Although there are many similarities to the English language concepts of information and media literacy discussed

above, Baacke resists a narrow conception of media competence, placing greater emphasis on the socio-ecological environment (the biography and life context) of the individual. Linking media competence to Bourdieu's (1979) concept of cultural capital, he also recognises that media competence is dependent on education and social milieu and is thus unequally distributed (Baacke 1999).

Note, further, that Chomsky's distinction between competence and performance also has resonance here, for in researching and measuring media literacy, we can only judge people's performance (how they act in relation to media) without necessarily grasping the complete picture of their competence (their abilities and knowledge). Moreover, cultural and societal factors have to be taken into account, because what is defined as media literacy or media literate is also dependent on what is normatively valued, disapproved or judged transgressive in a certain society (Snyder 2007). In judging the media literacy of young people, for example, we must take care to recognise both our normative judgements regarding media use and also the social constraints that may restrict the ways young people act by comparison with what they may know. In sum, we suggest that Baacke's elements of media competence (critical reflection of media and one's personal media use, knowledge about media and the media system, receptive and productive/creative media use) that go together with current definitions of media literacy (access, analyse, evaluate and create media messages) can be used for a broader definition of media literacy that is essential for discussing it with regard to a changing media ecology. The focus on the individual is essential, that goes beyond judging mere behaviour (performance) and making a list of do's and don'ts (e.g., concerning risks) by asking what the different components of media literacy mean for different people in the context of their daily life.

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### **3. Media Literacy in its Social Context**

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Although it is unlikely that one particular model of literacy could be appropriate for all members of a society across all contexts, it is useful to attempt some reconciliation among the myriad conceptions of literacy. As noted above, in both English and Germanic traditions, we see a growing trend in the use of media (or digital) literacy as the umbrella concept under which to integrate investigation and promotion of the diverse competencies and skills needed in the contemporary media and communication environment. However, media literacy continually reinvents itself as media and communication technologies evolve (Luke and Elkins 1998) as part of the complex sociocultural transformations underway in late modernity. In this section, we situate media literacy in its sociocultural context in order to transcend the conception of media literacy as an individual skill and, instead, emphasise the plurality and contextual embeddedness of media literacies.

A sociocultural understanding of literacy, developed in the anthropological tradition of media education, argues that digital media literacies comprise a set of socially organised practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for generating, communicating and

negotiating meanings (Scribner and Cole 1981). Further, this plurality implies that literacies should be understood as “the myriad social practices and conceptions of engaging in meaning making mediated by texts that are produced, received, distributed, exchanged, etc., via digital codification” (Lankshear and Knobel 2008, 5). Literacy does not simply demand knowledge and the ability to encode and decode messages through a medium but, rather, demands “applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use” (Scribner and Cole 1981, 236) as well as drawing upon it within one’s wider life context (cf. Baacke 1973/1980). The very diversity of digital media practices cautions against treating the uses of any digital medium as a specific singular type, since their forms and purposes will vary according to the context (Luke 2000). This approach also emphasises that people develop literacies as members of a society with uneven distributions of economic, social and political resources; thus “what the social literacies approach adds is a theoretical account of the relations between the cultural and economic capabilities of a society and the social contexts of technology use as shaping the interpretative practices of engagement with digital texts” (Livingstone 2009, 191).

In short, media literacy cannot be defined in isolation from either the immediate or the wider social contexts in which it is situated. As argued earlier in relation to media audiences in particular, people do not create meaning individually but through their participation in interpretive communities (Radway 1988) that encourage and value particular forms of literacy. For example, analysis of media practices among youth reveals that youthful media uses are less idiosyncratic than may first appear but, rather, they are shaped by sociotechnical forms of interconnection, as interpreted by the group-endorsed communication norms developed within particular contexts (Horst, Herr-Stephenson, and Robinson 2007). More generally, research on youth has examined the emerging links between literacy, learning and experiences of agency and pleasure in both informal and formal learning environments. These contextual specificities, strongly shaped by forms of economic and cultural capital, help explain why students have not all become expert bloggers and fan practice aficionados through participation in online culture (Livingstone 2009).

For young people, schools remain the key institutional context to support media literacy, for they reach everyone and can support deeper knowledge and critical understanding. However, it is in informal learning and leisure contexts that we can begin to see where and how young people ‘practise’ their media literacy in ways that may help pedagogues to develop learning strategies to better utilise these opportunities, forge links across contexts and bridge or even transcend gaps. For example, Finland is integrating media-related experiences from everyday life into pre-school education as forms of playing, enriching children’s understanding of media (Lundvall 2010). Relatedly, Norway has been implementing a ‘Knowledge Promotion Reform’ in its educational system with an agenda to develop media literacy among students through computer-supported collaborative projects using digital material in ways that combine creativity with critical understanding (Sjøby 2008). Media literacy training projects from Iceland (Jökulsson 2010), Norway, Denmark, Sweden (Gilje et al. 2010) and Spain (Camps 2009) encourage classroom-supported initiatives to go beyond the school context by helping students use digital media to express their artistic and civic interests. More widely, transnational analyses of youth media

production and distribution projects suggest that youth media initiatives, both in and out of school, can contribute to advocacy and empower youth to become expressive participants in their local and global multi-mediated realities (FisherKeller 2011).

At a macro level, media literacy must be seen as contextually linked to political and hegemonic power structures. The promotion of media literacy often heralds hope of empowerment, as reflected in the European Union's (EU) increasing tendency to position media literacy as a prerequisite of inclusion and citizenship. Empowerment cannot be reduced to the practical acquisition of skills; nor is it the inevitable consequence of opening up new opportunities and access to information. Empowerment lies in the provision of contexts in which people are confident to "feel able to do what they can do best" (Livingstone 2002, 237). At present, media literacy initiatives can be found all over Europe, although they are mostly rather small scale and not nationally organised, which makes it difficult to evaluate them cross-nationally. A recent assessment of media literacy levels within Europe by the European Association of Viewers' Interests (EAVI) drew on an approach that reflects the ambition and breadth of the foregoing definitions in encompassing both individual factors (technical skills; critical understanding; ability to establish relationships through media) and environmental factors (media education; media policy; media availability; roles of the media industry and civil society). This revealed a significant gulf between media availability and the informed use of it made by citizens (Celot 2011). One reason for this, as we explore below, is surely the considerable complexity of media technologies themselves.

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## **4. Managing the Media Literacy Burden in an ICT-Driven Economy**

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Many discussions of media literacy pay more attention to processes of education and social uses than they do to the particularities of the technologies involved. Further, when technologies are examined, the approach to media literacy tends to be more in terms of learning individual skills than a critical examination of the sociocultural competencies expected of, or desirable in, a digitally-mediated society more widely. Yet new and pressing issues arise in an ICT-driven economy with a complex socio-technical infrastructure. In this section, extending the text-reader metaphor of audience research, we consider literacy in relation to the design of media contents and forms. In other words, we conceive of literacy not as a stand-alone competence but as mutually defined in relation to the interpretability or legibility of the technologies with which people engage: the complexity of technological change "requires a fusion between those who can communicate and those who design and understand the new ICT tools" (Livingstone 2011, 33). To put matters simply, if the interface is transparently designed, with user-friendly tools and easy-to-navigate content, then the demands on people's media literacy are far lower than if the interface is opaque or difficult to use. Moreover, insofar as technologies do pose difficulties for ordinary users, this is not simply a matter of poor design but, also, a matter of the interests at stake. Thus, looking beyond



technological design, the nature of the media industry—increasingly transnational and commercialised—adds a further layer of complication.

Consider, for example, the complex question of the audience's personal data ownership on the internet, itself directly related to citizens' privacy and rights. In what Frau-Meigs (2011, 13) calls the "double bind of the information society": on the one hand, institutional and technology enablers for participation induce content creation and sharing (for example, MySpace) but, on the other hand, such content can be used by the industry to fulfil its economic interests (typically via advertising, marketing and other commercial uses of personal data and digital habits); significantly, the former shapes the latter and vice versa in a dynamic feedback relationship. It seems, therefore, that the opportunities for participation grow, creating a need within the audience to be recognised and remembered, which can only be achieved at the price of providing users' personal information (or identity) to participation enablers. From the point of view of media literacy, this raises crucial issues regarding how the audience's digital identity is understood, who are the real stakeholders in this process, and how the audience's best interests can be managed.

In relation to the implementation of identity management in the decentralised space of the internet, it may not be desirable for any one entity to become responsible for the management of the user's private information (J. Rogado, personal communication, 14 December 2012). Some recent technological developments in this area have produced a set of standards, such as OpenId (Rehman 2008), that give users the ability to create a single identity and associated credentials, to store it in an open repository (identity provider) and to use it as a valid form of authentication to access a whole set of websites (service providers). Such an approach, known as user-centric identity management (UCIM) (Jøsang and Pope 2005), is an advance from both design and media literacy perspectives, since users can be in control of their digital identities and need not remember multiple credentials. Yet, from the industry point of view, this process means that every time people return to a website, they are recorded as exactly the same person as before, so that collecting users' behaviour and interests has an enhanced commercial value. Google, Facebook and Yahoo, among others, have adopted OpenId-like technology, becoming centralised identity hubs, and thereby subverting the original 'user-centric paradigm.'

To illustrate the challenge that complex commercial interfaces pose to users' media literacy, we contrast the OpenId approach with those of Facebook and Google, as revealed by the *cognitive walk through method* (Preece, Rogers and Sharp 2007). In the first case, users log in to the wishlitr website (<http://www.wishlitr.com/login-openid/>) with an OpenId account. By selecting 'Sign In,' they are redirected to the identity provider website. There, an informed consent exists on the interface, and its visual affordances tend to privilege 'Deny' over 'Allow.' Additionally, the user has control of the agreement expiry date.

In the second case, users authenticate themselves to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) using Google and Facebook identifiers. If users choose to authenticate with Facebook, they are redirected to the Facebook login page. Here, the visual hierarchy of objects on the interface steers users towards the 'Allow' button, thus allowing IMDb to access all their private data and post on their behalf. No information exists on the interface about the expiration of the agreement. In the

Google case, similarly, the interface does not explicitly state which private data will be shared. The information needed to quit such agreement is carefully hidden in a ‘learn more’ link. Only attentive and literate users will understand that Facebook and Google pass on users’ personal information and related social graphs to their commercial partners.

The Facebook and Google cases illustrate what we may call the illusion of transparent interfaces: the user goal is simple but the (technical) process embeds the power of commercial interests. Consequently, understanding such interfaces is not a matter of technical skill but of critical / economic knowledge about commercial institutions and their interests. Educators may and should ask, what kind of media literacy initiatives could enable the public to understand, critique and navigate these user interfaces? However, to frame these challenges as media literacy tasks alone may doom media educators to failure, since the interface can be redesigned at any time, precisely to stay ahead of a critical consumer. Hence at a certain point, the challenges of media literacy may, instead, be seen to “point to failures of design, provision or regulation?” (Livingstone 2011, 34). Interestingly, in January 2012, the EC announced the reform of the EU’s 1995 data protection rules, with the goal of strengthening citizens’ privacy rights. The new rules will ensure that audiences receive clear and understandable information when their personal data is processed, which is good news insofar as this may decrease the ICT-related burden of media literacy. However, an important question remains: how will these directives be enforced? A possible path is that regulators oblige the industry to show evidence that the audience, in their diverse sociocultural contexts, is involved in the design of their cultural interfaces, according to ‘Privacy by Design’ and ‘Privacy by Default’ principles.

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## 6. Debunking Myths About Media Literacy

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As should be clear by now, we regard media literacy as a complex phenomenon, closely linked to an ambitious normative agenda to empower citizens in a mediated world. Such complexities, based on evidence of the multi-dimensional, multi-level and context-dependent nature of media literacy, challenge simple or even misleading conceptions of media literacy, especially when they appear to support narrow or undemanding policy initiatives. In this last section, we draw on the foregoing arguments and evidence to debunk four prominent myths.

The first myth concerns technological determinism. Typically framed by moral panics, this myth asserts that *digital media are changing everything*. This myth includes optimistic and pessimistic perspectives—asserting that digital media are changing everything for the better (techno-utopianism) or the worse (techno-dystopianism). Conceptually, there are many strong arguments against technological determinism (see MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999). Further, the evidence does not support such claims, with close examination always revealing that multiple social factors influence both the uses and consequences of technology and also its very design and distribution. In terms of the claimed transformative potential of digital media, the picture is again complex. On the one hand, some studies illustrate the negative impact of the new technology on

citizens, undermining any naive optimism about the transformations to be hoped for from technology. For instance, excessive internet use may have adverse effects on the psychosocial development of adolescents. For example, Stetina et al. (2011) found that massive multi-player online role-playing games result in problematic gaming behaviour, depressive tendencies and lower self-esteem compared with other online gamers. Relatedly, Kormas et al. (2011, 1) examined the psychosocial implications of problematic internet use among Greek adolescents, finding that although the rate is low (1.5% of the sample), “such behaviors are associated with an enhanced likelihood of hyperactivity and conduct problems.” On the other hand, some studies show a positive impact of the new technology on civic engagement, debunking excessively pessimistic views of technological change. Indeed, some studies reveal that the use of new technology directly enables the civic and political engagement of citizens, especially young citizens. For instance, the EUYOUPART project (Political Participation of Young People in Europe), which questioned 8,030 Europeans between the ages of 15 and 25 in 2005, found that those who engaged with interactive media tended to be more politically active (EUYOUPART 2012). Geronimos’ (2012) qualitative study also found that young Italians are willing to engage with civic websites to make the engagement meaningful to them.

The second myth concerns the excessive celebration of media-savvy agentic youth—the rhetoric of the ‘digital native.’ Despite popular claims about young people being digital natives (and older people being digital immigrants), research shows that many children and young adults lack the resources to understand and use digital media with any great sophistication or critical awareness (Jones et al. 2010; Livingstone 2009). In particular, they need a deeper, critical understanding of media power and processes, as well as more conditions to encourage participation if they are to acquire “digital wisdom” (Prensky 2012). Supporting these conclusions, the evidence provided by Helsper and Eynon (2010) suggests that it is possible for adults to be good users of new technologies, especially in the area of learning, by acquiring skills and experience in interactivity. Their study of the British population showed that breadth of use, experience, self-efficacy and education are just as important as age in explaining whether and how people become digital natives. As they claim, although adults may not be digital natives,

. . . what is very clear is that it is not helpful to define digital natives and immigrants as two distinct, dichotomous generations. While there were differences in how generations engaged with the Internet, there were similarities across generations as well, mainly based on how much experience people have with using technologies. (Helsper and Eynon 2010, 515)

Our third myth expresses the hope that media education may be left to schools alone. The problem here is that such efforts will not reach adults, and it cannot be safely concluded that, once today’s children have grown up, everyone will know all they need to about digital media. Instead, past experience suggests that technological innovation and the interests of the media industry will, together, ensure that media literacy challenges always face the public, young and old. Thus, adults

must also be addressed by media literacy policies, notwithstanding that no specific institution exists that can readily reach them all (as schools can educate children) (Livingstone 2011). Research suggests that adult development of media literacy depends less on their age or prior knowledge than on the existence of a powerful motivation. Ferrés et al. (2011) aimed to detect and diagnose the levels of competence of citizens—not media professionals—in order to justify, if necessary, the need for media education in the Spanish population. The results of this substantial quantitative and qualitative project revealed a clear correlation: as age increased, so did the proportion of people not competent in media education, with the effect especially evident among older people. Ferrés et al. (2011) therefore suggest the promotion of media literacy of adults, particularly among older people, noting that older people may become competent in handling technology particularly if they need it to communicate with their children or with people of their own age.

Fourth, we consider the myth that media literacy is, really, a simple phenomenon—for example, that what really matters is whether people can access the internet, or whether they can complete their tax forms online, or whether children know how to keep safe online. Although considerations of digital inclusion and safety remain important, media literacy includes far more than this: also crucial is the widespread development of critical and creative competences required for participation in the new media environment, so that citizens can innovate, share knowledge and effort, and harness their potential for civic and political engagement. As other empirical studies also highlight, Papaioannou's (2011) survey of 300 public high school students and 100 public high school teachers shows that although many students have the technical skills to use a range of basic applications on Facebook, but they seem less adept in undertaking more creative and participatory activities such as editing video clips, creating groups to share content or building their own blog. Compared to their technical skills, students demonstrate weaker critical understanding skills (see also Costa and Damásio 2010). It would, importantly, be misleading to assess only their technical skills and conclude that the work of media educators is done.

Having debunked these four myths, a fifth is thereby also debunked, namely, that media literacy will happen by itself as the public gets used to more and more complex media. All the evidence reviewed above reveals that it will not. Media education is an integral part of a framework that also consists of institutional support, civic society and industry efforts and individual motivation. Hence the present array of European policy initiatives (Ding 2011)—notably, in the MEDIA programme, Safer Internet programme, Life Long Learning Initiative and EAVI Initiative—are vital to increase media literacy among European citizens and European society.

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## 7. Conclusion

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In today's changing media environment, it is crucial that research and policy grasp the emerging complexities, genres and affordances of digital media. The increasing prominence and embedding of digital media in all aspects of society poses both challenges and opportunities regarding the development and continuous updating of competences required for people to use

them effectively. Research is converging to demonstrate the multiple ways in which audiences' media literacy is socially and culturally shaped, as well as its dependence on the extent to which the media are accessible, interpretable (or 'legible') and useable. Thus, as we have argued in this chapter, there can be no simple or single definition of media literacy, and the historical and cultural complexities of the phenomenon make its examination all the more, not less, urgent for the research and policy agenda. It is also crucial to recognise the limits of media literacy, especially given the growing technological complexity and deregulatory regime shaping digital media (Lunt and Livingstone 2012). Audiences and publics are afforded not only greater opportunities but also greater risks from a digital environment designed largely to meet more private sector than public sector interests. Moreover, the potential costs of the latter cannot be avoided insofar as going offline risks social as well as digital exclusion. In this context, the audience's media literacy task is considerably increased and, as Beck (1986/2005) points out, the burden of risk is individualised rather than recognised as consequent upon failures of design, provision or regulation.

If media literacy is to play a significant role in facilitating participation, promoting democratic values and enhancing Europe's economic future, greater institutional support is required. In 2009, the European Council defined media literacy as "the ability to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contents in a variety of contexts" (Ding 2011). Building on the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (European Parliament and Council 2010), the MEDIA and Safer Internet programmes, and its educational policy, including the Life Long Learning Initiative, as well as the EUROPE 2020 strategy, the European Commission (EC) is establishing an overview of the status of media literacy in Europe by initiating research into assessment criteria and a continuous monitoring process. This could lead to the inclusion of media literacy in the school curricula of member states and the strengthening of civil society and industry initiatives (Ding 2011). However, such efforts are presently limited to creating a policy framework to support member states in introducing or improving media literacy without addressing the social and economic conditions that account for relatively low levels of media literacy in the first place.

Pedagogic ambitions for media literacy emphasise that people should be able to make informed choices about media use, exercise their rights to participation in society and so become effective and creative agents in their changing media environments. Comprehending the rapid changes in communication that new technologies catalyse, and the complex media literacy that the changing media ecology entails, demands sustained critical attention. It is a particularly pressing challenge to identify media contents and practices that society wishes to enhance, the educational models that are deemed as sufficient and the cultural and political resources that underpin media literacy development. Hence, we have argued in this chapter that media literacy should be understood in all its necessary plurality, and that this plurality derives from the convergence of diversifying and complexifying media and information technologies, and from the socially shared and societally embedded nature of media literacies as well as the individual skills that these entail. Addressing these crucial themes will benefit research and policy examination of media literacy, particularly in relation to emerging practices of new media and their symbolic representation of

knowledge, learning and power. It is our contention, lastly, that audience research has much to offer in advancing this agenda.

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