The Two Media Literacies: A Cultural Studies Perspective

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Synopsis

This analysis identifies the problem of the media saturation of people's lives as a reason for developing programs teaching media literacy. It argues that the basic or foundational disciplines found in cultural studies, such as applied semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, sociological theory, and Marxist analysis, are the proper way to teach media criticism and media literacy (See Berger, A.A., Media Analysis Techniques, 6th edition, 2019). The methods by themselves are not adequate, which means that teaching media literacy also involves providing exercises and learning games that show students how to apply the theories they learn to their analyses of media texts (See Berger, A.A., Games and Activities for Media, Communication, and Cultural Studies Students,2004). Finally, it is suggested that media literacy should be taught at all educational levels.

Keywords: cultural studies, digital, literacy, media, visual.

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Introduction

Americans, and people in many other countries, lead media-saturated lives and the amount of time devoted to media is increasing. According to eMarketer.com, In 2012, Americans spent 11 hours and 39 minutes a day with electronic media. We watched almost five hours a day of television and spent 1.32 hours a day listening to the radio. We spent a bit more than an hour a day on our Smartphones and 4.10 hours on digital media of all kinds.

Table 1. eMarketer on Time Spent With Electronic Media 2012

Average Time Spent per Day with Major Media by US Adults, 2012-2017
hrs:mins and CAGR

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	CAGR (2012-2017)
Digital	4:10	4:48	5:09	5:29	5:45	5:56	7.3%
—Mobile (nonvoice)	1:28	2:15	2:37	2:54	3:08	3:18	17.5%
—Desktop/laptop*	2:24	2:16	2:14	2:12	2:11	2:10	-2.1%
—Other connected devices	0:18	0:17	0:19	0:23	0:26	0:28	9.5%
TV**	4:38	4:31	4:22	4:11	4:03	3:58	-3.1%
Radio**	1:32	1:30	1:28	1:27	1:25	1:24	-1.9%
Print**	0:40	0:35	0:32	0:30	0:28	0:27	-7.8%
—Newspapers	0:24	0:20	0:18	0:17	0:16	0:15	-8.2%
—Magazines	0:17	0:15	0:13	0:13	0:12	0:11	-7.2%
Other**	0:38	0:31	0:26	0:24	0:22	0:21	-11.3%
Total	11:39	11:55	11:57	12:00	12:04	12:05	0.7%

Note: ages 18+; time spent with each medium includes all time spent with that medium, regardless of multitasking; for example, 1 hour of multitasking on desktop/laptop while watching TV is counted as 1 hour for TV and 1 hour for desktop/laptop; *includes all internet activities on desktop and laptop computers; **excludes digital
Source: eMarketer, Oct 2015

In less than ten years these statistics changed radically. According to eMarketer, in 2020: US adults spent an average of 13:21 per day with media in 2020, up from the 12:23 spent per day in 2019. This growth was entirely due to an increase in time spent with digital media, which grew from 6:49 in 2019 to 7:50 in 2020. Time spent with digital media is expected to continue to increase, albeit at a slower pace, reaching 7:59 per day in 2021 and 8:09 in 2022. https://www.marketingcharts.com/industries/media-and-entertainment-117666

The Problem

If we spend 13 hours a day with media, and almost eight hours of those hours with digital media, it means media is with us just about all the

time. Statistics show that we spend around three hours a day watching television, down from four hours a day in previous years. We spend around eight minutes a day with newspapers and a total of 20 minutes a day reading printed matter such as newspapers, magazines, and books:

Newspapers, Magazines, and Books

The average daily time spent reading by individuals in the United States in 2020 amounted to **0.34 hours**, or 20.4 minutes. Adults over the age of 65 were the most avid readers, and those aged 75 or above spent almost an hour reading each day. Jul 26, 2021 https://www.google.com/search?q=hours+spent+reading+books+in+America

This means that while learning how to develop media literacy for print media may be important, learning how to analyze and critique electronic media of all kinds—that is, developing media literacy--is increasingly important. There are 185 million results on Google search for media literacy and 8,000 books at Amazon.com on the subject (accessed on 10/10/2010) so there is great interest in the subject but the amount of time devoted to teaching media literacy in our schools is questionable and not really adequate.

Solution

There are, I suggest, two literacies:

1. *Traditional print literacy* that involves learning what words mean and how to use them and how they shape our understanding of things, and

2. *Visual literacy*, which involves how images in film and electronic media of all kinds impact upon our psyches. This involves matters such as editing, sound effects, music, the narrative structure of texts such as commercials, dramas, news shows, documentaries, and so on.

Traditionally, courses in critical thinking tend to focus on the ideas found in printed works, the validity of the assertions made in them, the use and abuse of logic (logical fallacies) in texts of all kinds. But since electronic media play such a significant role in our everyday lives, to the critical analysis of printed texts we must add a new perspective, what I call media criticism and analysis.

The best way to do this, as I see things, is to teach students the primary techniques of media analysis such as semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, sociological theory, Marxist theory, and allied theoretical approaches such as Feminist theory and ethical theory. I attended a conference on visual semiotics in Argentina some years ago and when I talked with professors who taught seminars in semiotics, they all had the same complaint. They said, "My students complained at the end of the course that they didn't have the slightest idea about how to use the semiotic theory they had learned."

What this suggests is that when teaching students semiotics or any of the other techniques, it is important to develop learning activities in which the students learn how to apply the theories they have learned to texts. If students only learn theories, it is too big a leap for them to learn how to apply the theories on their own. So the goal is to create media literate students who have methodologies they can use to analyze all kinds of mediated material to understand how the media affect them: their psyches, their understanding of signs and symbols, their beliefs and values, and the societies in which they live. It is teaching methods of analysis that is of central importance.

Conclusion

The testimony of a whistleblower who provided research about the way Facebook damages its users is a glaring example of the need for developing critical media literacy in people of all ages. An article on the first page of *The New York Times* by Cecilia Kang (*The New Your Time,* October 6, 2021:1) states that the whistleblower said:

Facebook had purposely hidden disturbing research about how teenagers felt worse about themselves after using its products and how it was willing to use hateful content on its site to keep users from coming back…."I'm here today because Facebook's products harm children, stoke division, and weaken our democracy."

What the whistleblower, Frances Haugen, said ABOUT Facebook (and by implication other social media) deals only with the tip of the iceberg. Her testimony alerts us to the importance of teaching everyone, at whatever level they can understand things, from children to adults, how to become media literate. Media literacy should become as essential a part of the educational process as arithmetic and calculus and should not just be reserved for courses in universities.

Books by Arthur Asa Berger on Media Literacy

Games and Activities for Media, Communication, and Cultural Studies Students

Signs in Contemporary Culture: An Introduction to Semiotics.   2nd edition.   (Sheffield)

Media Analysis Techniques. 6th edition. (Sage)

Media and Communication Research Methods. 5th edition. (Sage)

Applied Discourse Analysis. (Palgrave Pivot)

Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture. 6th edition. (Rowman & Littlefield)