

***The promise of media literacy education  
when “everything is at stake” and “everything is expected”***

Monica Bulger

*Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, USA*

Gina Baleria

*Sonoma State University, USA*

Renee Hobbs

*Harrington School of Communication and Media, University of  
Rhode Island, USA*

Kimberly R. Moffitt

*College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, University of  
Maryland, Baltimore County, USA*



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**Corresponding Author:**  
Monica Bulger  
[monica.bulger@colorado.edu](mailto:monica.bulger@colorado.edu)

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**ABSTRACT**

In the midst of a tumultuous time in American and global history, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Annual Conference 2021 hosted a panel to explore the promise and limits of media literacy. Panelists discussed the vital role of media literacy education in responding to challenges to democracy, social justice, and public health. With “everything at stake,” the panelists moved through responses to current crises while grounding in a historical context and offering recommendations for the future. Curated transcripts share a pivotal moment when much was expected of media literacy and media literacy experts explored promise and possibility with an engaged audience of journalists and journalism educators.

**Keywords:** *media literacy, media literacy education, polarization, active listening, representation, misinformation, visual literacy.*



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## INTRODUCTION

Eight months after the events of January 6th, when a third of Americans continued to believe the 2020 election was fraudulent (Monmouth University, 2021) and a proportion of the country refused Covid vaccines and challenged mask mandates (Kirzinger, et al., 2021), five media literacy experts gathered to unpack implications of a fractured and often hostile information environment (Bulger & Davison, 2018). Renee Hobbs, Kimberly Moffitt, Michelle Ciulla Lipkin, and Monica Bulger discussed the significance of the moment during a panel moderated by Gina Baleria at the 2021 Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Conference. Could media literacy be a panacea for the nation’s problems? Was media literacy the bulwark between democracy and fascism? Between a civilized society and chaos? Throughout their careers, the panelists have addressed the expectation of media literacy education as a quick fix, a fix that at times has been both overestimated and underestimated. Drawing upon the media literacy field’s rich research base, the experts explored challenges and possibilities of the current media environment, offering historic context and hope for moving forward.

What started as a relatively straightforward panel presentation shifted to a meaningful conversation not only among the media literacy expert panelists, but the journalist and journalism educator attendees. In a year in which most conferences were virtual, a standard Zoom meeting became a space for a much needed back and forth. And while conversations happening adjacent to the field might be relegated to conference ephemera, the panelists recorded and transcribed this moment in the hope of sharing it here. The discussion focused on specific aspects of media literacy practice: active listening, information complexity, and representation. Each section provides a brief context-setting description followed by a verbatim transcript of the panel discussion.

## “I do what I do because it’s vital”

*Gina Baleria:* My name is Gina Baleria. I am an assistant professor of journalism and digital media at Sonoma State University, and a former broadcast and digital journalist. I’m moderating because my mission has always been to inform—to get information out there to help communities make decisions. This was my mission in journalism, and it’s my mission in education, too. I realize that there is this other piece to that, which is the media literacy piece (Baleria, 2022). So I’ve gotten really engaged and interested in this part of the conversation, and I have this amazing panel I’m so excited to engage with today.

By way of introduction: How do you define media literacy and why have you dedicated yourself to the study of it? Let’s start with Michelle Ciulla Lipkin, executive director of the National Association for Media Literacy Education.

*Michelle Ciulla Lipkin:* This is off to a great start. I am the executive director of NAMLE and we define media literacy as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communications. In terms of why I do what I do, this question always chokes me up because I feel there’s nothing more important than media literacy. It’s vital, no matter what side of the political spectrum you stand on; no matter what your beliefs, your values, the way you live your life, media is impacting all of us in significant ways. In order to thrive in this world, we need to understand what that means. And so for me, media literacy is...it’s the most important thing.

*Kimberly Moffitt:* I want to say ditto to everything that Michelle said, because that definition of media literacy is exactly what I have embraced and is part of the reason I decided to join the board of NAMLE in the first place. My commitment to media literacy issues is very much related to my research—media representations research on African-American children, in particular in Disney programming, which I’m quite critical of. And I got to that point because of my own children (Moffitt & Harris, 2014). I sat with my children watching Disney programming and realized that there was a lot that I need to teach them in order to be able to assess it, be critical of it, evaluate it, and make decisions on how they want it to show up in their lives, instead of just digesting it and believing that is what American childhood or American life needs to look like for all children.

*Monica Bulger:* I agree with Michelle and Kimberly, and as far as my motivation, I came to this as a teacher. I was teaching first-year college writing and noticing gaps in how my students were approaching information, and I just see it as such an essential part of our lives. It's essential for democracy; it's essential for everyday living, and so it was very important to me to engage with this. As far as my research background, I conduct focus groups with teens and tweens globally for UNICEF in Asia, Africa, and here in the US for Joan Ganz Cooney Center, to find out how youth practice media literacy in their everyday media use (Bulger et al., 2021; UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, 2020).

*Renee Hobbs:* I would just start by saying I am the proud author of a brand-new textbook on media literacy called *Media Literacy in Action*, which I've been teaching with for the last three years and of which I'm really proud. I've always, always thought about media literacy as the process of asking questions about what you watch, read, see, listen to, use, and play, so for me the process of inquiry has always been baked into the definition of media literacy. I see media literacy as a pedagogy, a way of learning, and that's because long ago, I recognized the deep intersections between two fields that once were together and then got separated. John Dewey—he's the grandfather of the field of education, and he's also the grandfather of the field of communication and media studies. The deep connections that he drew between the practice of literacy, the practice of citizenship, the social responsibilities of the creator and the receiver (Dewey, 1916), these ideas are fundamental to my understanding of media literacy.

*Gina Baleria:* So here we have four amazing people who have dedicated a big piece of their lives to media literacy education, and yet we can all acknowledge that there have been challenges with how it's been taught, how it's been received, how it's playing out in the public sphere. So, what is the biggest issue you see in this current moment? What are we missing when it comes to media literacy education?

*Renee Hobbs:* One thing that I've been fascinated with is how... Well, let's be honest, the rise of fake news was very good for our business, wasn't it, Michelle? [laughter]

*Michelle Ciulla Lipkin:* Yes, indeed.

*Renee Hobbs:* Whether you like it or not, people who would ask, "What is media literacy?" five years ago now know exactly what we mean. But one disadvantage of all that attention is that a lot of people think media literacy is only about news and information, and that's an especially interesting problem here at AEJMC, which has got a large preponderance of folks whose special area of interest is in news and information. To really understand media literacy, we have to understand it in relation to all the forms of expression and communication that are part of our everyday life, to the relational communication that we use when we're texting and chatting and sharing content with family and friends, to the entertainment culture that we consume, and, of course, the persuasive messages that are baked into the economic fabric of every aspect of our culture today.

*Michelle Ciulla Lipkin:* There's also this incredible lack of public understanding that then leads to challenges in funding and challenges in policy. Those have really, really impactful consequences if there isn't that core understanding of the broadness of media literacy.<sup>1</sup>

My point of view is as a network builder, a community builder, and really the question that as the national organization we ask is, how do we scale media literacy education? How do we make sure that this is something that all students at all ages are experiencing?

And beyond that, how are we making sure teachers get the training to be able to bring this to their students? If I were to look at it in that lens, one of the biggest challenges is that we are still, still, years and years and decades later, in a bottom-up model with media literacy. We're still depending on the individual teacher, the individual school administrator, the individual chair and dean to say, "This is important." And there is incredible work being done because of these individuals—and many of you are probably here right now, bringing it to your universities and into your communities. But as far as scaling, how do we utilize the best practice of bottom-up, and how do we make sure that we can look at media literacy education from a broad national context?

*Monica Bulger:* We're living in this moment of a huge messy information ecosystem. Ten or fifteen years ago, we could sort of know what our students were seeing. We could all watch the same shows. Now with

broadness, as well, stating that media literacy goes beyond evaluating truth in news coverage.

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<sup>1</sup> In a national survey by Ciulla Lipkin, et al. (2020), researchers identified 25 topics in media literacy education. Earlier in the panel discussion, Renee Hobbs addressed this

personalized media, with algorithmic recommendations, with so much information available, we really aren't seeing the same things. And because we're saturated with information and because, as Renee said, we have this powerful device constantly in our hands, in our ears, media literacy isn't a theoretical thing anymore where there are moments in which we're encountering information. It's constant, we're saturated with it, it's part of our heartbeat. Really, it's part of everything we do. What media literacy looks like now has been a really interesting challenge for this field. And one very heartening thing I'm seeing in talking to teens and tweens is their understanding of the different purposes for different devices, for different platforms, for different ways of engaging with information—when they need to do a more thorough engagement versus a lighter engagement (Bulger, et al., 2021).

*Kimberly Moffitt:* When I became an academic twenty years ago, I entered saying that issues around media representations were at the forefront of what I wanted to do and what I thought was necessary in the work around media studies in particular and unfortunately, twenty years later, we're still in that same spot. And even with the advent of having access to so much media and being able to pick and choose it, representations are still very much at the forefront of what I'm thinking about. And what I've seen happening in my own career is shifting away from adults and now thinking a lot more about children and how they are coming to understand who they are and their identities through much of what they are surrounded by in terms of media.

### **“Teaching us how to listen”: Media literacy education to help us hear each other**

The panelists explored the ways in which people seem to be talking past each other. Those who should be in conversation with each other are often not listening—or not really hearing, understanding, or seeing each other's full humanity. Not listening creates vulnerabilities to misinformation. Panelists agreed that *active listening* is a key practice of media literacy that has implications for how people engage with their communities, media, and each other. During the discussion, a participant asked about *neutrality*, prompting the panelists to explore the importance of intentionally bringing conversations about bias into media literacy discussions.

*Renee Hobbs:* I really like a question in the Zoom chat about media literacy's “neutrality.” I think that's

really fascinating. Of course, that was one of the great debates that I identified way back in 1998, should media literacy have a more explicit ideological agenda? At that point, there was this great awareness that media literacy had to be something that people, whatever their ideological perspective, felt was valuable. We've largely seen that in recent years, state legislatures have been favorably disposed to media literacy, in part because they recognize that it's a hammer that you can use to build all kinds of different buildings. And so, I do think that the question about how ideological perspectives enter into media literacy is a really important one, and especially for this knowledge community of educators and practitioners.

*Monica Bulger:* But I don't think that media literacy has ever been neutral or objective. I think we all are bringing our lived experience, our cultural identities, and our worldviews to our media literacy practice. Especially under the microscope with the “fake news” type of literacy, we have been revisiting this and seeing the strengths and weaknesses of our approaches, and that we are very subjective in the way we evaluate information. That subjectivity needs to then be something that we talk about.

*Gina Baleria:* You have an exercise, and a piece of that is to acknowledge that there is some truth sometimes in misinformation. It starts from somewhere and then it's taken somewhere else. That concept that you're sharing also involves, “Can we find the point at which we agree?” when we engage with each other. So I wondered if you'd share the way you approach the “strawman versus steelman” exercise with your students.

*Monica Bulger:* Often, people think that they're practicing media literacy when they look at the weakest part of people's arguments, the *strawman*, and I would encourage a rethinking of that to take the strong part of somebody's argument, the *steelman*, and meet them there, because that's where we can have more civil dialogue. Think about the last thing you read. How did you find it? Where did you find it? Why did you read it? And then, why did you really read it? Because there's our first reason for reading and then there's kind of our more real reason for reading. Then, what did you do with it next? A lot of us are sharing things based on headlines, a lot of us are promoting content that's problematic.

Last night I was talking to my dad and he raised concerns about Barack Obama's birthday party. I asked him where he was finding his information, and he said he was trying not to look at Fox News anymore and was instead asking Alexa. I asked, “So how did you end up

asking Alexa how big Obama’s birthday party was?” Because that’s not something you would just ask Alexa about. He said he’d heard about it at the shooting range. Okay, so then I asked him what bothered him about the party. I tried to meet him where he is. His strong argument was that he felt that politicians were doing things that they were telling the general public not to do [having large parties during COVID lockdowns]. Hypocrisy was his strong argument. I could have argued, “Why do you criticize Obama for apparent hypocrisy and not Trump?” But instead, I wanted to figure out what’s important to him, and where we can meet and talk about our values.

*Renee Hobbs:* What I love about your activity, Monica, is it’s an antidote to the increasing political polarization in our country, and it also reflects this socio-emotional turn that’s happening in the field of media literacy. Emotional responses and our feelings of empathy and our feelings of social connectedness are all implicated in the practice of media literacy. So that example really illustrates the socio-emotional turn that many of us are making in our media literacy practice.

*Kimberly Moffitt:* Monica, I really enjoyed the exercise, because I do think we have seen ourselves polarized in many spaces. I thought about what I last read—it was on Twitter, and there was a lot of digging I had to do to see where I was getting the information from, even though I felt like it was coming from a trusted person. I, as a practitioner of media literacy, kept digging to say, “Where did she get this from?” so that I would know where the source was and whether or not it was something to exert any energy into. I always make reference to the fact that it seems like the only identity that matters in American society right now is whether or not you’re conservative or liberal. And nothing else seems to matter. The person that I am, that I’m left-handed, that I wear glasses, I mean, none of that matters anymore. What that tells you is we’re not listening. We’re not even willing to listen and engage.

As a life philosophy for me, this journey is about, “How much more can I learn until the day I can’t take another breath?” So I’m always willing to engage; I’m always willing to listen. Even if it seems to resonate counter to how I view the world, I still want to hear it, because it helps me to then situate how I feel about a particular issue, or it might move me just a little to see something different. The key piece about that is active listening and teaching us how to listen. A lot of us think we know how to listen, but there are a lot of us who

don’t, and we need to practice that piece so we can actually effectively and sincerely engage. Where we are right now, I don’t think we’re able to do that.

*Gina Baleria:* That’s really important, Kimberly. There’s an organization I work with called Civity,<sup>2</sup> and they call it the “conversation before the conversation.” So, even before we engage—whether or not we agree and at what point—we share a story about ourselves and listen to the stories of others, because we can often find commonality in, “Oh, I’ve had that experience” or “Oh, I totally get that.” Once you see someone, “Oh, you’re not just a different political party than I am, you’re actually a human being,” then, “alright, now maybe I’m willing to listen to you” (Baleria, 2019; Strand, 2015). So that is a piece in this media literacy conversation, the goal of helping us hear each other.

*Kimberly Moffitt:* That’s why I’m focusing on the act of listening. So what stories can be shared that we then find these commonalities that we then can grow from in terms of our engagement.

### **“They want to simplify everything”: Media literacy education to help identify and engage with the complexity of information**

Media literacy is often invoked as a quick fix without considering the layers of engagement occurring between people and media. The panelists discussed the complexity people bring to their interpretations of media messages and offered more substantial framing of such interactions.

*Michelle Ciulla Lipkin:* I think part of the issue that fake news has brought up—and the battle to combat myths and disinformation—is it’s trying to simplify understanding information into just simply asking, “Is this true or not?” And while that’s a valuable question—and all of those ways in which we understand whether something is true or false are valuable—it just tries to put information into these two buckets: true or false; real or fake. And we all know—we all do this every day—information is so much more complex than that. I’ve been thinking a lot about complexity of the human being, and I think one of the things we’ll have to recognize is that our communications systems right now—which really revolve around social media platforms—do not, in any way, support complexity. They want to simplify everything. It’s much easier, even for news, to say it’s this way or that way, and that is just not the way the world actually is.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.civity.org>

I've been thinking a lot about the vaccinated versus unvaccinated conversation we're having in this country right now, and I even find people around me making these enormous assumptions about people who are not vaccinated. I've been thinking a lot about empathy, because I believe that there is a great majority of people who are not vaccinated in our country because they were manipulated and misled. There's a different reality out there.

I'm constantly frustrated about how, as a society, we try to simplify information and we try to simplify human beings. We are complex, and these are complex issues, and we need to recognize that they require us to think beyond our assumptions about large groups of people. Active listening is a part of that. I think media literacy is about being willing to dig deeper and have the conversations and understand why we think what we think, where we're getting our information.

*Renee Hobbs:* An attendee raised a really interesting point in the [Zoom] chat about how we move beyond thinking about media literacy as just about teachers and students, or parents and children, but how we think about it as everyone who's involved in the practice of communication and self-expression. We can level up our game by appreciating complexity. And that's a great entry point for talking with, for example, YouTubers about their communication practices. After all, many YouTubers don't think of themselves as media literacy activists. They think of themselves as entertainers, or they're trying to make a living at this new crazy business model of clicks and likes. The media literacy community needs to appreciate and enroll YouTubers in this work because they offer some lived experience that has real implications for our pedagogy.

*Monica Bulger:* Something else coming up as we're talking that I think we should also note is that responsibility for media literacy has really devolved to the teachers, the students, and I'd also say parents. And I think it's important to keep in mind platform responsibility. When there's misinformation and disinformation happening on YouTube, it doesn't need to happen. If Google can figure out the tech to deliver videos within seconds of being uploaded, I feel like they also need to figure out the tech to process that information, to process what are campaigns designed to promote falsehoods, because we're seeing the major consequences of not doing so.

### **Pushing back against pigeonholes: Media literacy education teaches us to “decide how we want to show up,” to be aware of representation and gatekeeping**

Media literacy isn't simply a matter of evaluating what is presented, but also of evaluating what isn't. The panelists considered voices that are missing from discussions, which voices are amplified, and the impacts of representation and gatekeeping on children's views of themselves.

*Gina Baleria:* Sometimes, moments in time can help us rethink things. We are in the midst of this massive moment in time. We are collectively experiencing the pandemic, and then of course in the U.S. and globally, a lot of the social justice issues. What do you see as the biggest challenges?

*Kimberly Moffitt:* For me, one of the biggest challenges is being able to create the space so that we've got a wide range of narratives, a wide range of stories being told about different people, so that we understand more about each other. But also, so children have a sense of how the hell they get to show up in this world, so someone isn't telling a story that pigeonholes them to say, “This is what you are” or “This is how you need to show up in the world”—but in fact allows us to have many stories to share (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). The problem though is that there is still a lot in our media pushing against that and, in fact, trying to squash or squelch all of those stories to make sure that the narratives we've been telling about groups of people remain the same, instead of there being space to have a number of different narratives shared (Moffitt & Henderson, 2020). I take that personally as a mom, but also thinking about this from my research perspective, I am focused on, what does that do to the trajectory of children, in terms of their life choices, in terms of their self-esteem, their self-worth? How does that all play into who they find themselves becoming or choosing to become based on many of the messages they received in their earlier years?

*Gina Baleria:* You said that in the past twenty years you haven't seen a shift. But we also talk about this firehose of information in digital spaces, and the gatekeepers have either been set aside or we've chosen different gatekeepers. The thinking is, “Oh, everyone can have a voice; we can all represent ourselves; we can get these other narratives into the conversation.” And yet, the firehose has either obscured that a little bit or nudged people in different directions without any ability to really parse it all as a layperson. So I'm curious, Kimberly, why you think we haven't been able to get at

that yet? Why do you think we're still where we were twenty years ago?

*Kimberly Moffitt:* A lot of it has to do with change, and not everyone likes change. If I'm in my most candid spirit, what I would say is, all it takes is to look at who is here at this particular session to realize that in my twenty years, there are still very few faces of color that are doing the work. What does that then communicate in terms of being able to push, in terms of—to Michelle's point about policy and the ways in which we practice doing this work—when so little has changed about the very people who are at the helm to do this work? I think it has a lot to do with change. I'm optimistic, because we now have so many avenues to be able to access this information, that we'll start to see ways in which it can show up differently. And I do think we have moments of resistance happening in the media, but in terms of it having monumental change in terms of how people see other groups of people, that's the piece that I think we're stuck with right now.

*Monica Bulger:* What I really am so heartened and inspired by in talking to tweens and teens is that they're expecting their media to better represent them. It's a demand. It's an expectation. In recent fieldwork for UNICEF in East Asia, we spoke with teens and tweens of color; we spoke with LGBTQ+ tweens and teens; we spoke with tweens and teens with disabilities. Across the board, they wanted to see people in media who look like them. Additionally, as part of a research study for Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, we spoke with tweens and teens in Texas, Illinois, Louisiana, California, and New York. In discussing movies and TV shows, youth did not want adult actors playing teens, they wanted *teens* playing teens; they wanted storylines that related to their lived experience, and not these ridiculous storylines that had nothing to do with their real life. I'm really excited to see how this translates into changes in programming.

### **Born influencing machines: Media literacy education includes a variety of narrative formats and forms**

Ever-changing formats of media challenge educators to consider ever-broadening perspectives of media literacy. Panelists discussed visual literacy, which included a discussion of deliberate choices of GIFs and emojis. Panelists also delved into the challenges of being influencer and influenced, rounding out the discussion by emphasizing the importance of including youth voices in curricular and policy decisions.

*Gina Baleria:* In the chat earlier, visual literacy was mentioned as a piece of media literacy. We have all of this imagery coming at us via TikTok, via YouTube, via Instagram, and students might be learning but they're also at the mercy of information appearing in their feeds that may not have been vetted. Visuals have the power to drag our emotions here and there. How do we help students navigate all of that? In particular, how companies use algorithms—that the algorithms are going to give us what we *want*, (instead of what we *need* or do not know about).

*Renee Hobbs:* “We are born influencing machines,” Neil Postman (1992) told us. By the very choice of the words we use, we are influencing each other, and we're always influencing each other emotionally, by the force of our character and our personality. It's not a new thing and it's not a bad thing. The Greeks told us twenty-five hundred years ago that it's a triangle of influence: All three of these modes of expression and communication (ethos, pathos, and logos) are essential for humans to influence each other. One of the reasons why I'm so passionate about teaching about propaganda (as is evident in my 2020 book, *Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age*), is because my students had gathered from their other teachers, some of them in high school and some of them at university, that propaganda was a bad thing and that it only happened in Nazi Germany. They learned that persuasion was a bad thing, a shameful thing, and advertising is a superficial, terrible thing that causes cultural ruin. And it's like, wait a minute, wait a minute. Advertising turns capitalism into poetry and even art. Activists are propagandists when they're doing their best work. The youngest living propagandist on the planet right now is Greta Thunberg, and she's brilliant as a propagandist, and I'm so proud of her propaganda, because she's putting her personality and her emotional values directly on the line. So I wouldn't ask Greta Thunberg to stop being so emotional and start being more logical. It would ruin her effectiveness as a propagandist.

*Gina Baleria:* That's true. I just worry that when we become slaves to our emotions and allow them to drive, we lose sight of what may be true, and of the humanity of others.

*Michelle Ciulla Lipkin:* I very much welcome emotion in my classroom. I teach media literacy and media criticism at Brooklyn College, and I actually noticed that by allowing students to have their emotions, they then can get to deeper critical thinking. And if I don't do that, then they actually don't get to the deeper

thinking. I share so much media content and text in my classroom, and I often start with that initial emotional response and stop after a minute of watching a video or initial reaction to a visual, because I think identifying the emotion, accepting the emotion and allowing them to have it allows them to then let it go. And if we don't let it go, then we're not going to get to the deeper conversation.

*Kimberly Moffitt:* There are a number of ideas being posed there. Safiya Noble's (2018) latest book on *Algorithms of Oppression* is exactly some of the work that we need to see done, because while we are talking about having access to all forms of media and how readily available it is to us in many ways, we also have to be careful about what it's reinforcing. That ties back to where I started about the idea of wanting to see *more* narratives being told instead of fewer narratives being told. But if we—as humans who are complex, who would come to the table with all their biases and preconceived notions—are creating these engines or creating these algorithms that reinforce the very thing that we're trying to get away from, then that's a major problem. This is one of the areas that media literacy does have to tackle in a very direct way—about dealing with the way in which systemic racism shows up in this space that we say is so accessible and available, and offering such a variety to a wide range of audiences—and still, some of the messaging that comes from that media simply reinforces what we've already been dealing with for centuries. And if we can't move away from that, then where is the beauty and value in what we're trying to teach our students? What we're trying to teach everyone? We need to be able to engage media, understanding how search engines are created.

I make a deliberate point of—when I'm sending emojis and GIFs—they have to have Brown people in them, because I'm Brown and I want the people receiving them to see Brown people communicating the messages. And when I'm pulling up what to send to folks, I am amazed that in 2021, I'm scrolling through for a *bit* to see Brown people. I don't understand that. Where is the diversity and variety in what we're communicating, of who is saying certain things? Often, it's colloquial expressions that Black people have been saying for all of my life, but yet the people who are saying them in my texts don't look like me. For some, this could be seen as a form of appropriation; I get it. I, on the other hand, acknowledge that these expressions have become universal. But in the spirit of universal inclusiveness, there should most definitely be greater diversity and representation in those emojis and GIFs. I

think it's so very important for us to understand that if we are about the business of teaching people how to engage in these forms of media, and being able to critique or challenge, or even just simply understand and take what they want from that, we also have to make sure that the systems that have been created aren't simply reinforcing what already is out there around issues of systemic racism.

*Gina Baleria:* To your point, the system of influencers—now that PR agents are moving in, they are trying to reconstruct the system of traditional media, and a lot of influencers of color are being left out of that.

*Kimberly Moffitt:* TikTok is an example of that. You can't underestimate the power of strong visuals. The work you can do around photographic journalism or photos—it's incredible, the amount of time you could spend in the class just with one image of the different perceptions and what's missing from these. What is outside of this frame? You cannot underestimate how powerful that can be for students. So I encourage that visualization.

*Michelle Ciulla Lipkin:* My son is nineteen now, but I have a very vivid memory when he had social media for the first time and the first time he experienced 9/11 on social media. He had lived in a social media environment where it's just a lot of silliness from twelve- and thirteen-year-olds. And I remember him so vividly pointing his phone at me and showing me an image of the plane going into the towers, and him looking at me with such despair going, "Why would anyone share this picture?" The conversation we were able to have about that was just astounding. But that visual, that choice of that visualization was such a powerful lesson for a twelve- or thirteen-year-old. You can't underestimate visual literacy as a way into these conversations.

*Monica Bulger:* I think an overarching theme that's emerging from this conversation is treating students as the experts of their own experience. And this is what we're talking about when we talk about how they're responding to different visuals, news articles, etcetera. And that's the thing we did at UNICEF and at Cooney Center, we foregrounded in our work that tweens and teens are experts in their own experience. And so what they're sharing—their processes for finding information, for engaging with information—is important for us all to learn and understand.



## “Everything is at stake”: Where does media literacy education go from here?

The panel concluded on both hopeful and serious notes. The panelists had discussed the importance of inclusion and representation, the power of media literacy to interrogate messages, and media delivery mechanisms. Media literacy had been discussed as complex practice, including communities and algorithms, seemingly small but powerful choices of GIFs, and also daunting but approachable recommendations for civil discourse. The panelists reflected on how the stories we tell, the stories we hear, and the stories we share are or can be part of deliberate choice.

*Gina Baleria:* So where do we go from here? What are the implications of not acting, of not addressing these issues?

*Monica Bulger:* Active listening, respecting each other, practicing civility with each other, is the way forward. And thinking about media literacy in terms of values, rather than specific techniques, is very critical.

*Kimberly Moffitt:* Active listening—or the act of listening—is exactly what has been missing, but it is very much a part of media literacy. If we are able to disseminate that information in our classrooms, in our community organizations that we’re working with, and especially, for me, working with young teenagers, that’s where I think some of the shift can happen.

*Gina Baleria:* I agree. Concepts like active listening, intentionality, bias awareness, and recognizing each other’s humanity can force us out of our filter bubbles and guide us toward engaging across our differences, with the goal of increasing understanding, as we better hear and see each other.

*Renee Hobbs:* I want to try to feature people who are doing media literacy education in ways that involve local and global collaboration, because I feel like that is the future, and that’s likely to accelerate our thinking about what’s possible.

*Michelle Ciulla Lipkin:* I know I’m a pretty positive person, but everything is at stake. Democracy is at stake. This is urgent. There is a fire burning outside of our window. We don’t have any time to mess around with this stuff. And we need to be doing whatever we can to ensure media literacy is part of our communities and part of our institutions, but also broader. Be an advocate, get involved with policy, get involved on the higher level of your communities and your state. We don’t have any time to waste.

## A call for continued advocacy and involvement

As the authors finalize this piece in early 2023, the stakes continue to be high. Many misinformation challenges of 2021 remain unresolved. In early January, Celine Gounder, infectious disease specialist and widow of sports reporter Grant Wahl, posted a letter in *The New York Times* debunking conspiracy theories that her husband’s death was a result of the Covid vaccine (Gounder, 2023). Her letter detailed death threats she had received and the high cost of misinformation. Similarly, following Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin’s collapse during a football game, physicians responded to a wave of misinformation linking cardiac arrest to vaccinations (Swenson, et al., 2023). In the same week, supporters of Jair Bolsonaro attempted a coup in Brazil based on misinformation about a rigged election (Nicas, 2023). These headlines from a week in January 2023 are representative of the concerning and continuing trends the authors discussed in their 2021 AEJMC panel.

The past few years have presented unique challenges to our field. The panel discussion highlighted the challenge of research and education when “everything is at stake” and the ground is constantly shifting. As our panelists entreated, together, we need to encourage each other, continue to advocate for media literacy education, and become involved in our communities, institutions, and states.

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A cherished part of participating in the field of media literacy education are the conversations. Held in conference spaces, lecture halls, hallways, over meals, in airports during flight delays, on flights, trains, cars, via virtual platforms, and certainly here in JMLE, the authors have enjoyed many horizon-expanding discussions. These inspiring conversations are frequently transformed into published and shared work, but many times, they exist as tendrils of memory or points on a never-ending to-do list. So, the authors wondered whether capturing a panel discussion and curating it for broader dissemination might be useful? We welcome your thoughts. Deepest thanks to the editors of JMLE and our thoughtful reviewers. A special thank you to our colleague and fellow panelist Michelle Ciulla-Lipkin for her support and insights.

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