

The Importance of Teaching Media Literacy: A Cultural Approach to Navigating Media Landscapes



Vanessa Schill
Kennesaw State University
December 8, 2016

YOLO: Think Before You Communicate

- “You only live once” but what you communicate can live on indefinitely, and have dire effects
- Americans seem incapable of distinguishing between fact and fiction as media artifacts fill their social media streams
- Familiarity with different forms of media does not automatically equate to being a discerning, savvy, or knowledgeable consumer of media in any form
- Justine Sacco’s “Tweet Heard ‘Round The World”

“You outta look out”: The “tweet heard ‘round the world”



Know Your History: American Studies and Media

- What is media literacy?
- Why use American Studies to teach media literacy?
 - It allows students to establish a background in theories that are necessary to understand, create, and consume media in a *meaningful* way
 - It helps students understand the historical, cultural, and social underpinnings that form the *why* that is critical in understanding media

Know Your Role: Education and Media Literacy

- Digital media devices are pervasive in American society.
- Children (K-12) are taught media literacy, but millennials and Gen-Xers are late to the game.
- There's an opportunity to teach adults how to use media in meaningful ways.
- We can “course correct” in the academy, as opposed to the “real world” where there's no safety net.

Prepare to Negotiate: Precepts and Methodologies

- One solution? A “Media Literacy: A Cultural Approach” course for undergraduate students.
- Guided by American Studies scholarship, as well as communication theories and methodology.
- The National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy:
 - Conference that consisted of 25 experts in the field, held to address the problem of media literacy.
 - Defined “Media Literacy.”
 - Developed 5 basic precepts common to media educators.

Getting Beyond Basic: It's More Than Just the “Telephone Game”

- Who uses media?
- For what purpose?
- How does this affect society as a whole?
- Claude Shannon & Warren Weaver: *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*

Source > Message > Receiver

Transactional Model of Communication

- Dean Barnlund's model examines communication through a symbolic, functional lens that suggests **communication is a dynamic process, and difficult to quantify.**
- Not reactionary, but transactional.
- Attribution of meaning.

Myth and Symbol

- Leo Marx's "myth and symbol"
- The object to which meaning is assigned is an image
 - Described as *a verbal recording of a simple sense perception*
 - **The image becomes a symbol**
 - *It is made to carry a burden of implication (value, association, feeling, or in a word, meaning) beyond that which is required for mere reference*

What Does It Mean?

- Historian Bruce Kuklick on assigning meaning:

We invest the image with much more than a denotational quality; we enable it to connote moral, intellectual and emotional qualities of a wider and wider range.

- Psychologist Robert Keegan's *Zone of mediation*:

Meaning is created between the event and the individual's reaction to it.

- Pedagogue Michael Ignelzi on constructing effective lessons:

Students as individuals will decode messages based on personal experience and not singular events or ideas.

Further Refined ...

- Communication philosopher Marshall McLuhan: *The medium is the message..*
- It is through media that the meaning, or message, is transmitted.
- What is the message?

We're Going Global-ish: Considering Digital Media Replication of Artifacts

Development of first mechanical, now digital, communication technologies have assimilated into our culture and have had a democratizing effect by:

- liberating the means of media creation.
- revolutionizing the reproduction of media artifacts.
- allowing for easy and global distribution of reproduced media content.

What does this mean?

“Meet Me Halfway”

- German philosopher Walter Benjamin argued this allowed the original media artifact to *meet the recipient halfway* ...
- The caveat: The reproducibility of the media artifact comes at the cost of its authenticity.
- Changes to the way the message is delivered change how a message is decoded, which change meaning, which has cultural implications (critical concepts in analyzing media).
- Ex: Newsreel v. Vine video

Bought and Sold: Media, Society, Culture, and Consumers

- Media as a commodity of community life that *configures the awareness and experience of each of us* (McLuhan).
- We are inescapably influenced by the ideas of others, so media can easily be used as a mechanism for control.
- If media are a commodity, then social issues surrounding policy and distribution of commodities becomes a critical issue when examining both the role of media in society and who controls media.

The “Culture Industry”

- Frankfurt School sociologists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno call this the “culture industry” and a product of capitalism.
- If you don’t think about it, or see it, you’re no longer thinking of the thing that you’re missing.
- Ex: Telephone to radio=active participants to passive listeners.
- This allows those producing and distributing the message to do so without allowing any means of reply from the listener, the consumer.
- For this reason, Horkheimer and Adorno assert that *technical rationality today is the rationality of domination*.

The TV Is On, But the Remote's Broken

- Contemporary communication theorist Robert McChesney is quick to point out that in a capitalist system, media as commodities can be problematic, and cites the *Telecommunications Act of 1996* as an example of this.

There are 1500 newspapers, 1100 magazines, 9000 radio stations, 1500 TV stations, 2400 publishers...



Owned by only 6 corporations.

THESE SIX COMPANIES ARE:



GE
Notable Properties:
COMCAST
NBC
UNIVERSAL PICTURES
FOCUS FEATURES



NEWS-CORP
Notable Properties:
FOX
WALL STREET JOURNAL
NEW YORK POST



DISNEY
Notable Properties:
ABC
ESPN
PIXAR
MIRAMAX
MARVEL STUDIOS



VIACOM
Notable Properties:
MTV
NICK JR
BET
CMT
PARAMOUNT PICTURES



TIME WARNER
Notable Properties:
CNN
HBO
AOL
WARNER BROS



CBS
Notable Properties:
SHOWTIME
SMITHSONIAN CHANNEL
NFL.COM
JEOPARDY
60 MINUTES

Got Money? Status and Subordination in Media

- Stuart Hall's theories of audience reception and decoding suggests that an audience's socioeconomic status impacts how they decode media messages
- Audiences decode messages reliant upon three hypothetical positions:
 1. the dominant-hegemonic position.
 2. the negotiated position.
 3. the globally oppositional position.

Power Relationships and Media

- Communication theorist Rebecca Lind posits that power relationships lead dominant social groups categorizing and treating subordinated social groups as less-than, reinforcing social hierarchy.
- “Audience participation” shows how we identify ourselves by and through our experiences with media.
- What about marginalized groups?
- Symbolic annihilation.

The Power of Representation and Public Memory

- Mass media in the U.S. are market driven, and play to dominant hegemonic groups to function successfully within a capitalist economy
 - Mass media's goal is to maximize audience; to entertain, not to educate
- Cultural critic Edward Morgan argues that media are not simply a reflection of society and social belief systems, but also help to shape them
- This in turn influences public memory

Is That Really How It Happened?

- Public memory is a form of discourse that determines what and how social phenomena are addressed.
- Marginalized groups are often left out of the social norm.
- Philosopher Lindsay Coleman argues that groups *attempt to counter-marginalize by reversing the trends of assimilation ... achieved through the creation of a new subculture or expanded minority, which in turn grows into a political movement.*

Can't Relate? Participate!

- Media researcher Helen Wood's audience study of women's interaction with TV programming led her to discover *mediated conversation*, a means of relating information garnered from media into daily life.

Illustrates how audiences modify media messages in ways that are meaningful to, representative of, and personal to themselves.

- Participatory culture can also be used by and for marginalized groups to gain recognition in media spaces.

Do We Get Points for Participation?

- Communication theorists Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Jacobs Henderson's collaboration and participatory culture expands on Jenkin's ideas.
- Digital technologies, such as the Internet, have furthered the creation of a collective of ideas being exchanged.

Of particular interest are marginalized groups who challenge societal norms through media production.

Digital Media and Flash Reason

- English and media studies theorist Gregory Ulmer's theory of "Electracy" reflects the instantaneous nature and speed of digital media.
- "Now" time: *no time for deliberative reason, the persuasion and the argument, needed to achieve the consent of the governed in a democratic society*, leaving traditional ideas of media literacy to fall short.
- "Flash reason" helps media consumers to filter through the noise of low-quality messages that can overwhelm high-quality messages.

Getting It Together: Media Literacy Pedagogy

- According to a Pew Research Center study conducted in 2013, almost 90 percent of internet users were between the ages of 18 and 29, and the demographics are dynamic.
- While these users may know about the *utility* of new technologies and applications, this is not to say that they understand the merits, consequences, and problems that can arise in using new media.
- Jenkins promotes media literacy education as a means of being able to distinguish truth from fiction in digital spaces, as well as understand consequence.
- Ignelzi posits that critical thinking, especially the application of meaning-making, is critical in media literacy pedagogy.

Teaching the Course: Key Points

- Education in media literacy must emphasize how to read and consume new media, including that found in digital and social landscapes
- Present students with terms and concepts that promote and explain:
 - *Why* media operate as it does across multiple texts and media.
 - *What* this means to individuals, groups, and society en masse.
 - *How* history, culture, and society influence the way media is created, consumed, and tied into popular culture and American society.

Sample Class:

Check out my sample syllabus in the appendix section of “The Importance of Teaching Media Literacy: A Cultural Approach in Navigating Media Landscapes.”