

Teaching Media Literacy

SECOND EDITION

Belinha S. De Abreu

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FOREWORD TO THIS EDITION

Media literacy changes the way I look at everything, not just TV, computer, iPod; it changes the way my eyes work. It teaches me how to learn.

—G. Shapiro, high school student, Ithaca, NY, 2012

I incorporate this student quote in all my presentations because I believe it encapsulates the power and significance of media literacy education. Media literacy education has the power to change the way that students see the world. As the executive director of the National Association for Media Literacy Education, I believe that media literacy is the most important skill of the twenty-first century. Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of mass communication. The purpose of media literacy education is to help individuals of all ages develop the habits of inquiry and the skills of expression that they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators, and active citizens in today's world.

The media have a profound impact on all of us. It doesn't matter what you are passionate about—it can be social justice, health care, climate change, gun control, or immigration—you are influenced by the messages you are receiving and creating. It doesn't matter where you are from or which side of the political spectrum your beliefs fall on. The media ecosystem is a part of your world and you need to understand it.

If we are serious about helping our youth be successful in this world, media literacy is critical. It is not only necessary; it has to be a national priority. Media literacy education should be an essential part of our education system. Media literacy skills are vital to becoming an active and engaged citizen. To be literate in the twenty-first century, one must be media-literate.

In the Stanford Education Group's 2016 study *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning*, researchers determined that students have trouble judging the credibility of the information they encounter online. The study concluded that "overall, young people's ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: *bleak*."

I was not shocked by the findings of the study. How would students know how to judge the credibility of information online if we are not fully committed to media literacy education in the United States? How can we be surprised, given the fact that the information landscape has changed drastically over the past five years, and our education system has not been able to keep up? How can we expect students to know how to navigate this complicated ecosystem when we don't teach them the skills they need to do so?

Our information landscape has changed exponentially in the last decade, and the pace of change is not going to slow down. The urgency for media literacy education has never been greater. We must teach students the skills they need to navigate this complex world. We must help them find their voice and the answers to important questions.

What does it mean to be well-informed today?
What does it mean to be a citizen today?
What does it mean to be engaged in this participatory culture?
What are the skills we need to be literate in today's world?

These are questions we must grapple with. We must be willing to search for answers with our students, and let those answers evolve over time as technological changes create different forms of communication and different paths of information flow. Media literacy education empowers individuals and helps them develop a habit of informed skepticism that will be valid today and in the future, no matter what that future may bring.

If you have picked up this book, you have already decided that media literacy education is important. I applaud you and urge you to bring the lessons in these pages to your classroom. Your students will be better for it, and so will the world they live in.

Michelle Ciulla Lipkin

Executive Director, National Association for Media Literacy Education
2019

FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

Media literacy is starting to attract attention. State standards and education courses now address its importance. Educators discuss it at national conferences and summer institutes. New classroom resources support the integration of media literacy into the curriculum. These developments are all good news for those teachers who are already eager to accommodate their students' interest in popular culture. Other teachers, however, may have reservations about bringing controversial topics into the classroom, or they may feel unprepared without an organized curriculum.

Teaching Media Literacy combats those reservations with its combination of theory and practice. Teachers, especially those reluctant to teach media literacy, need a practical guide like this one. Belinha De Abreu's lesson plans address both analysis and production, providing the building blocks of an authentic media education.

Teaching Media Literacy also helps educators pinpoint important teachable moments, from coverage of the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina to the Academy Awards or a new video game. Each lesson includes objectives, materials, assessments, and reflection. De Abreu provides challenging key questions and multimedia tie-ins that can be used to launch follow-up activities. In part 3 of this book, "Resources for Teaching Media Literacy," teachers will find the best websites, films, and media education organizations, all of which can help make lessons more vibrant and relevant.

De Abreu's in-depth explorations of cultural contexts and media conventions make media studies more meaningful. I feel sure that the clear path through the media environment outlined in this book will inspire other educators in their own media literacy journeys.

Barry Duncan (1936-2012)

Media Education Consultant

Author of *Mass Media and Popular Culture*

2007

PREFACE

When the first edition of this book was published more than a decade ago, media literacy had already been identified within the professional literature as a growing educational need—students of all ages were finding themselves interacting on a daily basis in a new and complex multimedia information environment, and these students had only a limited understanding of media formats, media creation processes, effective information assessment and evaluation practices, fundamental issues of information privacy and information ethics, and the many other knowledge areas that contribute to make a person *media-literate*. Over the ensuing decade, more schools began to offer fully realized media literacy programs across the K–12 curriculum, yet the need for improved media literacy is even more pressing today than it was ten years ago. This is partly due to the continued explosion of online information: with each passing day, more information is available to more people in more formats than ever before, and people of all ages are spending more time each day accessing, creating, sharing, and interacting in these varied media environments.

Moreover, the ongoing need for increased media literacy education is especially critical in light of recent events that have revealed widespread public confusion about how information is created, vetted (or not), and spread online. In particular, the recent surge of “fake news” has shown us that poor media literacy skills can lead to very real social, political, and economic consequences.

Fake news stories are “masterfully manipulated to look like credible journalistic reports [and] are easily spread online to large audiences willing to believe the fictions and spread the word” (Holan 2016). Fake news and other types of intentional misinformation have been with us for centuries, but with the massive amount of information now being created and circulated online, there is much more public exposure to misinformation today than there was even just a few years ago.

Misinformation in itself is not necessarily harmful. Some types of misinformation, such as satire and parody, can help to teach students critical thinking skills and encourage them to think about contemporary social and political events, provided that they recognize this misinformation as misleading or untrue. Misinformation becomes harmful when people don’t—or can’t—recognize it as such. Unfortunately, students of all ages have limited understandings of how today’s media resources are created, and as such, they often lack the critical skills to determine which media resources they can trust. A Stanford University study found widespread confusion among middle school, high school, and college students when it came to assessing the veracity of online information. The study authors concluded that “overall, young people’s ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: *bleak*.” (Wineburg et al. 2016). Students in the study had difficulty differentiating between news content and advertising content, and most lacked an understanding of how biased perspectives affect news and other information messages.

The surge of intentionally created fake news was especially high during the run-up to the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, with literally thousands of false stories about candidates and issues swirling across the Internet. No one knows for sure what effects these falsehoods might have had on voters, but the numbers of fake stories that circulated and the numbers of users who saw them were undeniably huge. On Facebook alone, of “the known false news stories that appeared in the three months before the election, those favoring Trump were shared a total of 30 million times on Facebook, while those favoring Clinton were shared 8 million times,” and over half of U.S. adults who later recalled seeing these stories believed them to be true (Alcott and Gentzkow 2017).

The motives for creating intentional misinformation can be profit-driven, ideological, malicious, or simply mischievous. Regardless of their motives, for the most part these actions are legal, and it is difficult if not impossible to stop misinformation at its source.

That is why teaching media literacy skills is so vital in today’s educational settings. Equipping students with the evaluative and critical skills to understand media production and distribution is the single best method for preventing the widespread sharing—and believing!—of false information. Just as media forms and formats are always evolving, so are the crucial components of effective media literacy. “The old tools of media literacy—source checking, relying on known outlets—aren’t enough when a hacker in Macedonia can easily create a website that looks legitimate, then quickly make thousands of dollars from advertising as bogus stories circulate” (Rosenwald 2017).

This newly updated volume discusses both the classic components of media literacy—such as digital literacy and critical thinking—and newer media literacy issues, such as young people’s interactions in social media and the use of emerging educational technologies for teaching media literacy. A thorough understanding of the full range of media literacy concepts and issues can help educators to create truly authentic learning within a range of media environments, and help build a more informed, more critical future media audience writ large.

Denise E. Agosto, PhD

Director, Master’s of Library and Information Science Program
College of Computing and Informatics, Drexel University
Philadelphia, PA 19104

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INTRODUCTION

The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right, And were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1787

Everything which bars freedom and fullness of communication sets up barriers that divide human beings into sets and cliques, into antagonistic sects and factions, and thereby undermines the democratic way of life.

—John Dewey, 1939

More than a decade has passed since the first edition of this book was published. Surprisingly, it appears that now media literacy education has made its official debut despite all that. There is a clearer realization that this type of learning is necessary and needed in schools. This shift is not surprising as 2017 was the year when the term *fake news* became an official entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The term *fake news* propelled the topic of media literacy education to the forefront in the minds of people who want to hold education as the bar for the betterment of our society.

The term *fake news* has been turned upside down by various people whether in politics or in the mainstream media; even the ‘idea’ of media literacy has been politicized. Despite all the rhetoric, the need for media literacy learning is evident and more urgent than ever. Given all this, the Media Literacy Five Key Concepts and Questions as designed by the Center for Media Literacy still very much guide the work in this book, and the way in which media literacy instruction should be conducted. These key concepts and questions are as follows:

1. **All media messages are “constructed!”**
 - Who created this message?
2. **What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?**
 - Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. **How might different people understand this message differently than me?**
 - Different people experience the same media message differently.

4. What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

- Media have embedded values and points of view.

5. Why is this message being sent?

- Most media messages are created in order to gain profit and/or power (Center for Media Literacy 2005).

These Media Literacy Five Key Concepts and Questions will be given a more thorough examination in the chapters ahead.

At every level, whether it is K–12 education, higher education, non-profit sector, or governmental policy, there is a growing sense that media literacy education is paramount in assisting our society to combat misinformation and miscommunication. Much of this sentiment has arisen in response to the ways in which media messages have comprehensively infiltrated our culture through social networks, cell phones, and other electronic tools. There has been a fundamental and unprecedented shift in the way that people are now informed: information is no longer provided by three anchors on three television networks; the mass media have multiplied through various electronic venues and much of the information that is accessed consists of misrepresentation and misdirection. The society we live in has become much more polarized; and despite all the technology afforded to us, many people, issues, and events are ignored, marginalized, or disregarded.

Social network platforms have become a widely used means for exchanging information, but this information is primarily based on our own interests, beliefs, and preferences. We have created filter bubbles where our information is streamlined with our perceptions. Social media platforms use algorithms to determine what information we really care about, and bots direct messages to people based on their preferences and search choices. Therefore, much of the information on social media is narrowly focused and does not offer a wide variety of perspectives. In fact, we must realize that many of us exist in an information bubble, and for many people that bubble has become an echo chamber in which their beliefs are repeated, confirmed, and reinforced. In the United States, this realization came with the presidential election of 2016, and in Europe it came with Brexit in the United Kingdom, and the election between the centrist Emmanuel Macron and the right-wing populist Marine Le Pen in France. (As a side note, the centrist Macron won.) France literally stepped away from the two big political parties that had governed for decades. What ties all these events together? Or perhaps the broader question is, how did all of these world changes come to be? The answer in almost all of these world events is the unprecedented importance of social media, which allowed many media messages to go out unfiltered and unverified. It was the circumventing of traditional media modes which has engaged the audience, and it has created a disconnect between many people and reality.

Dialogue on political and social issues has become contentious in our society. There are widespread disagreements in our conversations over basic facts that have truly affected the way we interact with each other. It is apparent that the polarization that was formerly restricted to politics has expanded drastically to include almost any topic, whether it is social, economic, or cultural. And, there is an underlying discontent with the representation of basic issues in the media. As a result, media literacy has become the voice of hope and change so that more balanced perspectives can be attained. At the same time, there is a worry it will be thought of as an inoculation or a sole prescription which will make us more divided and even more politicized. At the moment, nameless faces and nameless sources

of information hold our individual attention versus more verified and salient sources. This concern is real and must be addressed through the work of media literacy education.

The media landscape continues to change. There are now billionaires who have taken to investing in major metropolitan newspapers, thus beginning another shift and change within the news-gathering industry. As of the writing of this book, the billionaire Patrick Soon-Shiong had purchased the *Los Angeles Times* and the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. Soon-Shiong thus joined Jeff Bezos, who purchased the *Washington Post*; John Henry, who purchased the *Boston Globe*; and Glen Taylor, who purchased the *Minnesota Star-Tribune* (Koren 2018).

The news media, the fourth estate, have been failing at their job for many years, and despite the hope that they would improve given what has transpired recently, there are still many omissions from the media. Information is garnered to represent a political stance, not to clarify actual issues. These events have bred more public distrust of the media, and that distrust continues to grow. In a study by the Knight Foundation, the number of people who trust the media has declined dramatically. In the foundation's key findings they learned:

- More Americans have a negative (43 percent) than a positive (33 percent) view of the news media, while 23 percent are neutral.
- About 66 percent of Americans now say that most news media don't do a good job of separating fact from opinion. In 1984, only 42 percent held this view.
- Less than half of Americans, 44 percent, say they can think of a news source that reports the news objectively.
- On a multiple-item media trust scale with scores ranging from a low of zero to a high of 100, the average American scores a 37 (Knight Foundation 2018).

This book tries to address the topic of media literacy by providing in its first half not only core understandings around media literacy and an introduction to the ideas of media literacy, but also contributing voices that reflect the different chapter topics. Keep in mind that things are changing and evolving even as this book is being written, and without a doubt they will continue to do so because information is evolving so quickly in our media-saturated society.

The ten chapters in Part 1 of this book offer a broad perspective on media literacy. The chapters cover such topics as the crucial role of critical thinking in media literacy, the problem of fake news, misrepresentations in the media, digital citizenship, media literacy as a global phenomenon, and media literacy as a vehicle for social and political change. Within each chapter, reflective pieces are included by a variety of teachers, higher education professionals, and other authorities. Their reflections enhance the main theme of the chapter, and they provide an extended lens for thinking about each chapter's ideas, and for developing those ideas within a classroom or in society.

In chapter 1, "Media Literacy—The Key to Critical Thinking," we look at critical thinking as an underlying concept of media literacy. In fact, one cannot exist without the other. The reflective piece for this chapter has been provided by Ryan Goble and Pam Goble, the authors of *Making Curriculum Pop*, and by Ben Peterselli and George Wedel, who are high-school English teachers. They look at Orson Welles's famous "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast and ask the question: could another hoax like "War of the Worlds" happen in 2019?

Chapter 2, "Media and Information Literacy Crossover," focuses on how UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) brought together

the idea that the fields of media literacy and information literacy should be a joint unit. Expanding on this idea is Marcus Leaning, whose reflection synthesizes these ideas by providing some historical background, as well as a much-needed discussion on the overlap between media literacy and information literacy.

Chapter 3, “Perspective, Perception, and Point of View,” looks at the idea of representation. The media try to present a multidimensional viewpoint, but in most cases the perspective they offer is actually quite limited. This lack of representation distorts our worldview and adds to the confusion about how information is received and repurposed. The focus in this chapter is on how the media construct reality, or alternatively, how they construct a misguided or inaccurate reality. In her reflections in this chapter, Joanna Marshall provides her insights on how representation has changed the way she teaches her science curriculum, and how it has opened the door for discussing the codes and conventions of the media.

Chapter 4, “Fake News” and “Alternative Facts,” addresses what is perhaps the most pressing concern in the field of media studies; how the media have been changed and affected by fake news and alternative facts. It also addresses some of the most widespread misperceptions and misrepresentations on the topic, while at the same time taking a serious look at how the media have contended with these problems. Kathleen Currie Smith, who has helped her students to navigate the information/misinformation world, provides the reflective piece for this chapter. At the same time, she reinforces the fact that the work of fostering media literacy had been done by library media specialists long before the terms *fake news* and *alternative facts* became a part of the mainstream educational conversation.

Chapter 5, “Digital Citizenship, Privacy, and Digital Leadership,” flows well with the conversation of media literacy education because of the mediums used by this generation of students. Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram have become the tools of choice for students in accessing, sharing, creating, and curating information. They are places which engage our youngest generation, but also have created some social dynamics which have not been positive. By the same token, this chapter attempts to step away from the protectionist model and offer the potential good such mediums can offer as well as other services if students become digital leaders. The reflection in this chapter is by Marialice B.F.X. Curran and her son, Curran Dee. Their reflection talks about the empowerment of kids within digital platforms. Their personal journey together in teaching the community of teachers, learners, and anyone invested in kids focuses on being proactive in the digital environments that are of most interest to kids, without inhibiting their potential for innovation and exploration.

Chapter 6, “Digital Literacy,” takes on the idea of educational technology and how it is a focus of learning for educators and students. Beyond working with technology is understanding how and what it can be used for in and outside of the classroom. Teaching students to become a part of the digital learning is fundamental to the dialogue of the value of technology, thereby connecting to the world in order to create authentic learning experiences. Emily Soler looks at this very point from an elementary school perspective. Her reflection opens the conversation to the value of transferable learning across the various communication tools that use digital technologies.

Chapter 7, “Technology as a Tool for Social Inclusion and Transmission,” looks at how technology can raise the level of connectivity between people of all backgrounds, and how it can even change the way we think about community. The chapter looks at how we can reach all of our students using digital technology, while fostering learning and meeting the needs of our students in various ways. In their reflection, Ryan Goble, James Hultgren, Michael Roethler, and Nessa Slowinski add their voices to this dialogue by providing seven examples of how this has been done in their learning community.

Chapter 8, “Equity vs. Equality,” looks at how these two variables are constructed and deconstructed via the media. Understanding why a media message is being sent, and noting that most media messages are generated to gain profit and/or power, are two concepts covered here. Understanding the idea of stereotypes as presented by the media is also a part of the discussion, since the media have created a platform of inequity within communities. Jimmeka Anderson, founder and executive director of the organization called “I AM not the Media,” adds her thinking to this chapter by looking at how these concepts can be taught.

Chapter 9, “Global Connections,” takes us from looking at what we do with media literacy in the United States to what we see happening around the world. At the same time, this chapter considers the worldview of media messages by looking at how messages are interpreted and reinterpreted, and how stereotypes about other societies and cultures are reinforced. In his reflection, Neil Andersen, a retired educator and president of the *Alliance for Media Literacy*, contributes his thinking on media literacy as a global phenomenon through an understanding of Marshall McLuhan’s concept of the “global village.”

Chapter 10, “Social Justice and Advocacy,” considers how media literacy is a vehicle for social and political change. This chapter looks at media literacy in the mode of *how* to think vs. *what* to think. Furthermore, it advocates for the idea that media literacy is bipartisan and is vested in many social issues. At the same time, it addresses the question: would the work of media literacy help to assist our society by changing the way messages are delivered and received? Michael Godbout, a theology teacher, provides his own thinking on this issue from his standpoint of challenging high school students to develop their own ideas, rather than simply adopting the media’s viewpoint on many social issues, with the end goal of developing empathy.

Part 2 of this book, “The Major Formats of Media,” offers ready-to-teach lessons that examine the major formats of media, as well as new and emerging media. These chapters examine the principles of media literacy through discussion and instruction about messages; they dissect the construction of a variety of media formats, ask students to evaluate and analyze various forms of media messages, and teach them how to access media information.

Chapter 11, “Providing Media Literacy Education in the School Library and Classroom,” is probably the most significant chapter in this book for library media specialists who are interested in incorporating media literacy as part of their repertoire, but are uncertain as to how to approach it. This chapter will supply specialists with the background knowledge they need in order to feel confident about providing this type of media literacy learning.

Chapter 12, “Television: News, Sitcoms, and Dramas,” contains lessons in which students analyze and understand the messages sent via the various news organizations. At the same time, the chapter looks at how the situation comedies on television relate to families, relationships, violence, and how these dramas’ final resolutions are achieved within a 30- or 60-minute show.

Chapter 13, “Movies: Entertainment and Authentic Learning,” showcases what motion pictures offer the classroom environment. Questions that will be addressed include: How do movies impact society? How do historical films and historical events compare with their representation in blockbuster films?

Chapter 14, “Photography and Images: Capturing Moments in Time,” addresses the importance of the photograph, while also defining technical processes such as photo manipulation and cropping. Some of the questions answered in this chapter include a look at how

modern technology has changed the value of photographs, how you can detect truth vs. fiction in photos, are photographs airbrushed or does the model really look that good, and are the war photographs that we see real or are they created images? The lessons in this chapter teach students about photo appreciation, while also examining some of the negative and positive aspects of photo manipulation.

Chapter 15, “Music and Radio: Table-Turning in the Classroom,” takes a look at the impact of popular music on students and young people. The questions addressed in this chapter include: How do the images in music videos reflect women, body image, and so on? What are the messages in music videos? How does radio airplay determine the impact of music? Students will have the opportunity to explore the ideas presented within different musical genres and consider their point of view and representation.

Chapter 16, “Advertising: Sell and Tell,” demonstrates why students have become a multibillion-dollar industry for marketers through the use of sophisticated marketing techniques. The lessons provided will help to create knowledgeable consumers who will investigate the truth behind commercial messages. This chapter will also look at how the media portrays self-image, and how this impacts teen viewers. The goal is that by demonstrating how media images are designed, and by understanding the unique language used by marketers, students will learn to be critical consumers and knowledgeable buyers.

Chapter 17, “Media Production and Other Digital Technologies,” discusses the importance of students’ participation in the creation of their own, original media creations. Teaching about the media means providing students with the opportunity to create their own messages using electronic media. Capturing video through an iPhone, video camera, or some other format as a voice for students’ ideas and concepts is a valuable tool. This chapter will show how video production is an avenue for students to demonstrate what they perceive about their media messages, while giving them a taste of hands-on, real-world experience in the making of a video.

Part 3 of this book, “Resources for Teaching Media Literacy,” provides a series of resources that will assist the reader to access and locate more information on the topic of media literacy. Within this part, you will find the “Glossary,” “Timeline of Media Literacy Education,” “Movies on the Media,” and finally “Media Literacy Resources.”

The new edition of this book at this moment in time is of paramount importance. It re-releases lesson ideas that have always been present while also addressing current concerns with misinformation, miscommunication, and the shifting role of technology as a medium of news communication. The media provide an opportunity for learning and for expanding young minds. They can do this both negatively and positively. The ideas and tools presented in this book, along with the reflections from professionals who are educators, learners, and contributors to the field of media literacy in the United States and elsewhere, provide us with a vehicle to foster informed and engaged learning communities and empower future media-literate change-makers.

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