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Beyond Cynicism

How Media Literacy Can Make Students More Engaged Citizens

A Report by
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- *Beyond Cynicism: How Media Literacy Can Make Students More Engaged Citizens* explores the effectiveness of media literacy in U.S. higher education. The study is premised on two fundamental questions about the outcomes of a media literacy course: Do students become more knowledgeable consumers of media messages? Do students, armed with that knowledge, become more engaged citizens?
- To address these questions, this study employed 239 University of Maryland undergraduates in a pre-post/control quasi-experiment, the largest-ever study of this kind on the post-secondary level, to evaluate learning outcomes of a media literacy course. A series of focus group sessions were also administered to investigate student opinion of media's role in civil society, and the value of media literacy education.
- The results from the study reflect a tale of two halves. While the experiment did find that the students enrolled in the Maryland's *Media Literacy* course increased their ability to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze media messages in print, video, and audio format, the focus group discussions revealed students cynical and negative about media's role in civil society.
- These findings suggest that media literacy education must focus on the connections between critical skills and the explicit understanding of media's necessary role in civil society.
- Based on this research, a new curricular framework for post-secondary media literacy has been developed, aiming to connect media literacy skills and outcomes that promote active citizenship. Recommendations for media educators, administrators, and policy makers are also provided for successful media literacy education initiatives on all levels of education.
- This research has also been applied to a global media literacy program titled *the Salzburg Academy on Media & Global Change*. The Salzburg Academy is a three-week summer program that gathers 60 students and a dozen faculty from around the world to explore media's role in global citizenship and create curricular products for all levels of education worldwide. The results of this study have been used to create and guide the Academy's mission and outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Beyond Cynicism: How Media Literacy Can Make Students More Engaged Citizens explores what media literacy courses actually teach students. Do students become more knowledgeable consumers of media messages? Do students, armed with that knowledge, become more engaged citizens? A large multi-year study found that classes in media literacy do seem to make students more knowledgeable about media messages—but also found that the increase in students' analytical abilities does not perforce turn them into citizens who understand and support media's essential role in civil society.

This study used a sample of 239 University of Maryland undergraduates in a pre-post/control quasi-experiment, the largest-ever study of this kind on the post-secondary level. The study did find that the students enrolled in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism's *J175: Media Literacy* course increased their ability to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze media messages in print, video, and audio format.

Based on the positive empirical findings, focus group sessions were conducted within the experimental group and the control group. The students from the media literacy course expressed their belief that media literacy education enable them to "look deeper" at media, while feeling more informed in general. Yet, when the discussions concerned media relevance and credibility, the students who so adamantly praised media literacy, expressed considerable negativity about media's role in society.

Preliminarily, these findings suggest that media literacy curricula and readings which are solely or primarily focused on teaching critical analysis skills are inadequate. Critical analysis should be an essential first step in teaching media literacy, but the curriculum should not end there.

Beyond Cynicism: How Media Literacy Can Make Students More Engaged Citizens concludes by recommending a way forward for post-secondary media literacy education. *Beyond Cynicism* offers a new curricular framework that aims to connect media literacy skills and outcomes that promote active citizenship. With a greater understanding of the limitations of teaching students to be cynics, university faculty can adapt their courses to give students not just analytical and evaluative tools to critique media, but a focused understanding of why a free and diverse press is essential to civil society.

A NOTE ON EDUCATION, CITIZENSHIP, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Because democracy depends on citizenship, the emphasis then was to think about how to constitute a competent and virtuous citizen body. That led directly, in almost every one of the founders' minds, to the connection between citizenship and education.

Benjamin Barber, 2002, p. 22

An informed citizenry has always been a central, though not exclusive, prerequisite for civil society. From town meetings and community bulletin boards to the advent of radio, television and the Internet, mediated information has always been a powerful means for informing a democratic public.

Michael Schudson, Professor of Communication at the University of California, San Diego, traced the notion of citizenship in the United States to arrive at what he calls the notion of a monitorial citizen—a gatherer, monitor, and surveyor of information, who “swings into public action only when directly threatened” (Lemann, 1998). Schudson (1999) argued that there is no single idea of a *good* citizen: an active participant in his or her community who votes, volunteers, participates, and believes in the public service of the government. Rather, in the present citizenship is largely a mixture of the attributes that would comprise valuable contributions to society, or good citizenship. No longer, Schudson argues, is citizenship solely based on politics. New concepts of citizenship must deal with new understandings of society, democracy, and participation.

Media are one of the “tools” that Schudson (1999) incorporates into his thinking about citizenship: “Where do the media fit with all of this? The press is not the focal point of civic life. It never was. It is a tool of civic life. It is a necessary tool. The media's main task is critique, monitoring, a watchdog over authority.” Media may not be the sole attribute for informed citizenship, but they are necessary and increasingly present in daily life. Technological advancements have allowed for increased media penetration into all facets of society. Chat rooms, blogs, cell phones, social networking sites—the Internet—have increased the amount of time individuals spend with media, and shifted the way in which people gather and process information. This growth in digital media is at the center of new ideas about citizenship in the United States. Writes Schudson (1998): “If the new digital media are to be integrated into a new political democracy, they must be linked to a serious understanding of citizenship, and this cannot happen if we simply recycle the old notion of the informed citizen” (p. 1).

Schudson's monitorial citizen is premised on the notion that he or she must know how to interact with information. Media literacy education teaches individuals the skills to monitor, survey, and understand information. It possesses the capability to help citizens actively understand the role of information in their community, and

the necessary existence of media for civil society. Back in 1958, Gunnar Myrdal, Swedish economist and social welfare architect, penned words that resonate with relevance to this day:

Progress has to rely on education. The individual must be made to know the social facts more accurately, including his own true interests and the ideals he holds on a deeper level of his sphere of valuations...I am quite aware that this prescription is nothing less and nothing more than the age-old liberal faith that “knowledge will make us free.” (p. 81)

Myrdal’s words, in the context of media education, reinforce the need for individuals to learn about information in a way that enables them to question the messages they encounter that inform their civic values.

Schudson is correct in stating that there is no one notion of a “good” citizen. However, one constant in society that is directly correlated with citizenship and society is education. Education is a necessary tool for the continued progress of society. Media education cannot help bring to light any of the new ideas Schudson develops for his monitorial citizen. However, it can help people understand how the media—“a necessary tool of civic life”—influences, shapes, and enhances civic life.

In 1985, British media scholar Len Masterman wrote about the possible influences of media education on citizenship. Masterman underscored the role media education can play in democratic institutions. Wrote Masterman (1985):

Media education is an essential step in the long march towards a truly participatory democracy, and the democratization of our institutions. Widespread media literacy is essential if all citizens are to wield power, make rational decisions, become effective change-agents, and have an effective involvement with the media. (p. 13).¹

Masterman posited that students, if educated about media, would not only increase their ability to intelligently use media for personal gains, but also further strengthen their values and beliefs about democracy. In this way, the necessary conversations and discussions about political, social, economic, and cultural issues would be knowledgeable, diverse, and progressive. Masterman (1998) wrote, over a decade later: “It is our crucial role as media teachers to ensure the continued evolution of that critical public” (p. xi).

Media literacy education, as Masterman conceived it over 20 years ago, must teach media in a way that forces students to be the critical public. It must be both engaging and skeptical. It must show both the positive and negative functions of the mass media. It must teach skills but also the larger ideological and cultural connections between media and society. If not, the relevance of being critically engaged with media will be compromised.

Masterman’s ideas also reaffirm the co-dependency between media and citizenship. In the present day, it is safe to assume that the mass media have adopted the role of a social institution. Media increasingly provide people membership in groups (programs, chat rooms, products), stabilize daily life (newspaper, TV daily programs, email), and function as a large educational tool (TV, Internet, entertainment) (Silverblatt, 2004). Further, in the United States the average young adult (18-30) spends 6.5 hours per day outside of the classroom engaged with media (Kaiser, 2005). David Buckingham (2003), Professor of Education and Director of the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media, Institute of Education, University of London, wrote:

The media are undoubtedly the major contemporary means of cultural expression and communication: to become an active participant in public life necessarily involves making use of the modern media. The media, it is often argued, have now taken the place of the family, the church and the school as the major socializing influence in contemporary society (p. 5).

It is now difficult to discredit the media as the main conduit through which necessary means of information are transmitted. Parallel to its socializing functions, media has unavoidably adopted a civic role: that of preserving and maintaining an

¹ Taken from the 2006 publication, *Global Trends in Media Education*, by Tony Lavendar, Birgitte Tufte, and Dafna Lemish, (Eds). See references for full citation.

informed public. To be active civic participants, individuals must have access to the information that explains why certain civic decisions are made and to what effect. They need to see justifications, details, viewpoints, arguments, opinions, and facts. Without access to such information, people are effectively denied their right to make the informed decisions they believe will better themselves, their community, and their country.

Henry Jenkins, Professor of Literature and Director of the Comparative Media Studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), builds on Michael Schudson's concept of the *monoterial citizen* to investigate the relationship between media in a digital age and citizenship. Jenkins explores this relationship by focusing on the ways in which digital media and the Internet have shifted what it means to be an "informed" citizen. In Jenkins's 2006 text *Convergence Culture*, he combines Schudson's new idea of citizenship with collective intelligence scholar Pierre Levy's form of knowledge culture²—"knowledgeable in some areas, somewhat aware in others, operating in a context of mutual trust and shared resources" (p. 226)—to promote a scenario in which:

The monitoring citizen needs to develop new critical skills in assessing information—a process that occurs both on an individual level within the home or the workplace, and on a more collaborative level through the work of various knowledge communities. (p. 227).

Jenkins's work highlights the need for a citizenry educated about the role of media and information in democracy. The growing prescience of media in individuals' daily lives has led to a shift in how people attain information and build personal views on civic and political issues. These shifts in information attainment and processing have at their core the relationship between media, citizenship, and civil society. Different forms of civic discourse are predicated on the idea that citizens need to be informed to be contributors to their democracy. Media's increasingly central role in this process has, in addition to calling for a new way to think about informed citizenship, led to an increased need for education about media and its civic functions.

How does media literacy education approach citizenship? One of the main aims of media literacy education is to provide not only media analysis skills, but also the ability to effectively use media to exercise democratic rights (Brownell & Brownell, 2003). Art Silverblatt (2004) wrote of the need for media literacy to counteract the public's increasing reliance on media:

...audiences have come to expect the media to serve the functions of traditional social institutions—functions that they were never designed to fulfill, looking for answers when the media presentation is simply focused on attracting a large audience by any means possible. The public's reliance on Western media for guidance and support can therefore be problematic

² For more information on knowledge cultures, see: Pierre Levy (1997), *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*. Perseus Books: Cambridge, MA.

unless media messages are examined critically and put into meaningful perspectives (p. 38).

Silverblatt accurately reflects the current role of media in society, and the increasing importance of educational parameters that address this current state. What do Silverblatt's "meaningful perspectives" look like? And where do they come from? In light of Silverblatt's argument, meaningful perspectives are perspectives on citizenship. If indeed an unhealthy reliance on media has evolved in Western societies, post-secondary media literacy education can address this unhealthy reliance by teaching about media's civic, social, and democratic roles and responsibilities.

Teaching media through a civic lens does not only include "news" media, or "hard" news program. In addition, media literacy must teach the role of pop culture, entertainment, game-playing, and blogging in the political process. In this way, media literacy education can use the ideas of citizenship put forth by Jenkins, Schudson, Mastermann, and others (see Barber, 2007; Jerit et al., 2007; Dahlgren, 2006; Lewis, 2006) to elicit learning experiences that highlight this complex relationship.

The theoretical starting place for media literacy should be the aware citizen. Teaching critical skills is inadequate without teaching how these skills can lead to an enhanced understanding of the civic role(s) of media. Media literacy can make aware the media's social influences on democratic and national ideologies. If successful, media literacy can be the educational tool that enables healthy relationships between individuals and the media.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed two research methods—a quasi-experiment and focus groups—to address the following research questions:

Q1. How does media literacy education affect undergraduate university students' media comprehension, evaluation, and analysis skills?

Q2. How does media literacy education influence university students' understanding of media's roles and responsibilities in a democratic society?

To explore these questions, this study utilized 239 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Maryland. The entire sample participated in a series of experimental measures that took the form of a pre-post/post-only quasi-experiment design, with a post-only control group. The experiment measured media literacy skill attainment—comprehension, evaluation, analysis—across TV, print, and radio formats. Additionally, a portion (n=27) of the sample participated in three focus group discussions, which explored student views on media's role in society and democracy, and the possible influences of education about media.

In this study statistics alone did not provide a complete picture about what students learned in the J175: Media Literacy course. While the experiment did reveal significant effects of the curriculum on students' critical media analysis skill levels, it did not address individuals' views on media. Focus groups were added to provide such experiential reflection. Employing mixed methodologies allowed for both inductive and deductive reasoning and assertions to be made, with greater quality and scope (Sydenstricker-Neto, 2007; Creswell, 2002).

While the results of this study cannot speak for media literacy across all higher education disciplines, and cannot offer more than one framework based on the specific outcomes discussed herein, they should and can advance theories on media literacy education in the university. This study can further offer frameworks for implementing media literacy in university departments, and for conducting more stringent research on post-secondary media literacy education. As the results will reflect, such research should be highly valuable to the future quality of media literacy education.

EXPERIMENTAL FINDINGS

Students Reflect Skills Attainment

The following five hypotheses were tested to measure the skills attained by students enrolled in a media literacy course. The results proved that, across the board, students enrolled in a media literacy course increased their media comprehension, analysis, and evaluation skills. They did so uniformly and across TV, radio, and print

media. The results proved that the first half of the post-secondary media literacy educational experience was effective. Students gained the skills that the field deems necessary attributes of a media literate individual.

- **Hypothesis One:** *The average test scores of students who did not participate in the course will not be different from the average test scores of students who took the skills assessment test before the start of the J175 course.*

The data analyses revealed that the *no-course* group ($M=40.16$, $SD=5.209$) and the *pre-course* group ($M=40.89$, $SD=3.6$) showed no significant difference in average media literacy skills assessment test scores, $t(62)=.933$, at $p < .05$.

- **Hypothesis Two:** *There will be a statistically significant relationship between the average test scores of the students who took the skills assessment test both at the beginning and end of the Journalism 175: Media Literacy course.*

The overall average media literacy score for the pre-course group ($M=40.89$, $SD=3.6$) and the post-course* group ($M=45.98$, $SD=4.4$), $t(62) = -6.94$ $p < .001$, revealed a statistically significant difference in average test scores. This also occurred with similar strength ($p < .001$) in TV ($t= -4.705$), radio ($t= -6.170$) and print ($t= -5.552$) average scores. Such findings showed that significant improvement was made in skill attainment from the beginning of the media literacy course to the end.

- **Hypothesis Three:** *There will be a statistically significant relationship between the average test scores of the students who took the skills assessment test at the beginning of the course and the students who only took the skills assessment test at the end of the course.*

The *pre-test* group's ($M=40.89$, $SD=3.6$) average total media literacy test scores were significantly lower than the *post-course only* group ($M=44.96$, $SD=4.5$), $t(108) = -6.193$, at $p < .001$. This result again proves that the difference, across all media formats, was significant, and not extensively a cause of externalities.

- **Hypothesis Four:** *There will not be a statistically significant relationship between the average test scores of the students who took the skills assessment test at the end of class for the second time and the students who only took the skills assessment test at the end of the course.*

The data analyses revealed that the post-course* group ($M=45.98$, $SD=4.4$) and the post-course only group ($M=44.96$, $SD=4.5$) showed no significant difference in average media literacy skills assessment test scores, $t(108)=1.437$, at $p < .05$. These results proved that, on average, all students exposed to the media literacy curriculum increased their comprehension, evaluation, and analysis skills pertaining to print, video, and audio media.

- **Hypothesis Five:** *There will be a statistically significant relationship between the average test scores of the students who did not take the course and the students who only took the skills assessment test at the end of the course.*

The results confirmed significant differences in the average test scores across all media formats and in total media literacy scores between students who had not enrolled in the media literacy class ($M=40.16$, $SD=5.209$), and those who had ($M=44.96$, $SD=4.449$), $t(108) = -6.326$, at $p < .001$.

The experimental results help build a picture of media literacy's effectiveness in higher education. The empirical data results were not an end but rather a beginning. Increases in media comprehension, evaluation and analysis are only one-half of the media literacy picture. Media literate individuals should be capable of applying their newfound skills to understand and critically engage with media's larger social and civic responsibilities. British media scholar Sonja Livingstone (2004) has particularly attempted to advance media literacy beyond a skills-based approach:

...to focus solely on questions of skill or ability neglects the textuality and technology that mediates communication. In consequence, it unwittingly supports a universalist, cognitive framework, thereby neglecting in turn the historical and cultural contingency of both media and the social knowledge processes that interpret them (p. 8).

The results of the quasi-experiment successfully proved that students enrolled in a media literacy course increased their critical skills in media analysis across all media formats. Such results, however, failed to address the crux of the media literacy experience: does this skill attainment allow students to better understand the larger political, ideological and democratic complexities of the media?

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Students express considerable negativity towards media

The focus groups explored connections on a personal level. The overarching aim of the discussion sessions was to detect how students understood media's role in civic life. The implicit assumption was that students with now stronger critical media skills would be more knowledgeable and aware of the necessity of a free press for

democratic society. Three focus groups were conducted: two sessions (n=10, n=8) were conducted with students from the J175 course, and a third focus group (n=9) was conducted with students from the control group.

Numerous similarities and differences were noted between the two experimental focus groups and the control focus group. Most importantly, and perhaps of concern, were the consistently negative views towards media expressed by the experimental group students. These students, all from the *Media Literacy* course, expressed the benefits of media literacy education and its influence on their relationship with media. They praised media literacy's ability to help them "look deeper" at media. However, when the conversation addressed media's influence on society and democracy, the students' cynical views overshadowed the substance of their conversation. They seemed empowered to be defensive against media. The experimental groups, in general, focused more on denouncing media functions than on critical reflection and discussion of why media works as it does and to what end.

Reasons for the experimental groups' negative responses can range from their heightened critical inquiry into media through the J175 course, to a general cynicism towards media functions by younger generations. Nevertheless, these sessions evoked interesting questions concerning the negativity displayed by the experimental groups. How much of a role did media literacy play in the students' negativity? Did the media literacy curriculum reinforce and exaggerate cynical and pessimistic ideas already instilled in students' minds? Or were the students simply unable to connect the skills they attained with a substantive understanding of media's democratic and social roles?

Sample Quotes – Experimental Group Students

"All news is biased news."

"I've never turned on the news and been like, wow, glad I watched that, made my day a whole lot better...or, like, felt informed about something relevant."

"I think the American people are just settling for what's on the television...they aren't going to dig deep to find more information if they aren't satisfied. They may complain and say, oh this isn't what's real, but they aren't going to go investigate it more. Everybody does this...so it doesn't really matter."

"I have this theory that the media is much more about money and control than anything."

"I think the government holds back a lot of information, because of fear of public reaction."

“I think our government knows a lot more about Iraq than they tell us. I think the government has a foot in every major corporation out there. Media corporations.”

“I think real news is pretty depressing. Everyone wants to turn towards some type of entertainment just to take their mind off of all this depressing news.”

“I’m actually a little disheartened. I mean, to think that it’s always going to be this way. It’s sad.”

“I think a lot of our generation is cynical. I personally feel like organizations are out to get us. I think everyone needs to question everything. I think when the media tell you something on the news, they aren’t trying to give you information, but trying to benefit themselves. It’s like what corporations try to do to better themselves.”

“...you can’t trust anyone or anything. You have to be on your toes. You can’t trust anything. You always have to assume there’s a catch or someone’s out to get something from you.”

“We aren’t plotting rebellion, but I think we are a generation that is cynical.”

Sample Quotes - Control Group Students

“I personally always try to assume that journalists are going to try and tell us the truth because of their code of ethics, but I also understand that people are people. So they’re going to have biases whether they try as hard as they can to be fair or not.”

“You can have smart guides for news media, but there is always going to be the money and the corporations, and you won’t be able to separate those things. Politics and religion are always going to be involved, but we know that, so we have to see it...”

“Everything is going to have a bias no matter what. I mean we’re never going to go over to Iraq and see what’s happening, so it’s good to have a discussion about these things. To question things.”

“I watch news with a cynical eye. I think you have to. Because people watch stuff and buy everything they see, and that’s annoying. I don’t watch news and say, really, and take everything they are saying...you have to be cynical to be realistic.”

How can cynical learning outcomes be separated from skeptical ones? Media educators may have to create new frameworks for media literacy that can both

teach critical media analysis and teach about how critical media analysis can help inform and engage individuals with the civic and democratic necessity of media. If taught to enable both of these outcomes, media literacy may avoid unintended outcomes of the focus group discussions.

GOING FORWARD

Connecting Skills and Understanding

The results of this study reported that:

1. Students enrolled in the media literacy course increased their ability to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze TV, print, and radio messages.
2. Students enrolled in the media literacy course expressed negative views when discussing the relevance and credibility of media and its role in a democratic society.

These results exposed a general concern about the outcomes of a post-secondary media literacy experience. Media literacy, in higher education, has focused heavily on critical and analytic skills without equally prioritizing media's social, civic, and democratic implications. As evidenced in this study, students were critical but not reflective of what being an informed citizen entails. If the connection between skills and critical awareness is refocused as the primary outcome of media literacy in the university, it stands to reverse the trends apparent in the results of this study.

A New Framework for Media Literacy in Higher Education

The following framework consists of a definition for post-secondary media literacy education and a model supporting the transfer from skill attainment to the media literate citizen. This framework should be seen as a platform for media educators from which substantive dialogue about media literacy education reform can ensue. These discussions should include curricular reform, implementation strategies and new integrative teaching and learning initiatives.

The Definition

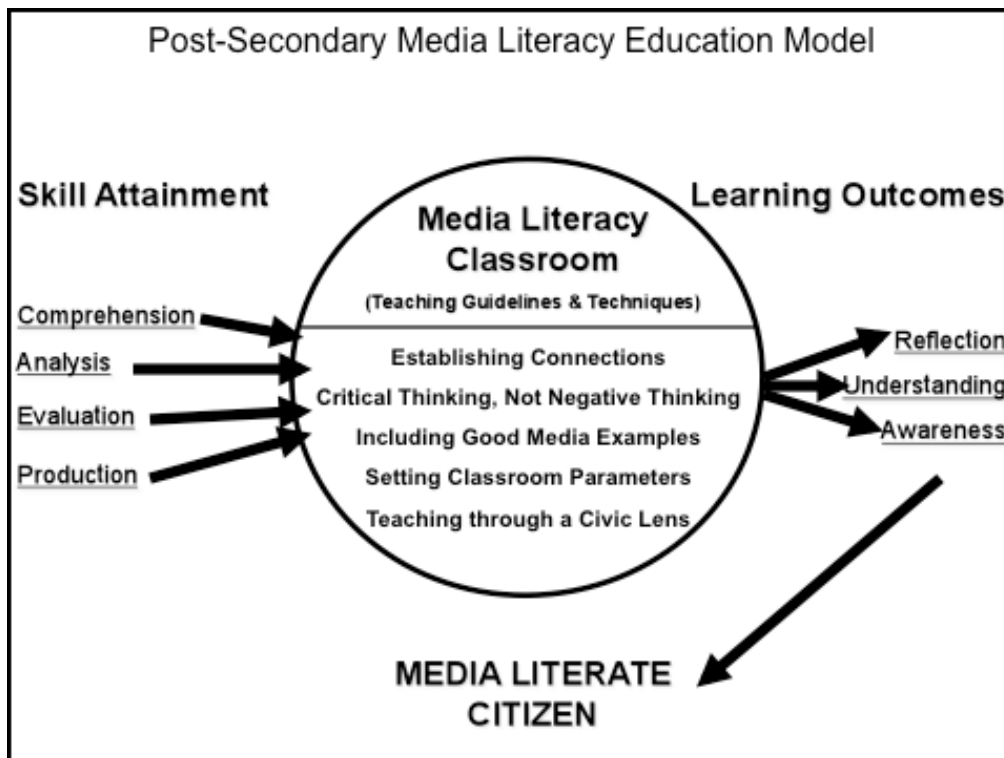
Post-secondary media literacy education aims to prepare students to become:

- *Good Consumers* – by teaching them how to understand, analyze, evaluate, and produce media messages, and;
- *Good Citizens* – by highlighting the role of media in civil society, the importance of being an informed voter, and a responsible, aware, and active participant in local, national, and global communities.

Such an educational experience can help better prepare university students for active and inclusive roles in information societies.

The key to the definition is its emphasis on outcomes. Specifically, the outcomes of a media literacy education should not only be critical skill attainment but also critical understanding that enables informed and aware citizenship. This definition should be seen as a blueprint for new and dynamic media literacy initiatives in college classrooms.

The Model



The post-secondary media literacy education model represents the transfer from skill attainment to critical learning outcomes in the media literacy process. The concepts are not new to media literacy. Rather, they are reorganized to address the specific shortcomings of a post-secondary media literacy experience as evidenced in the findings of this study.

The model begins with critical skill attainment, which is the common goal of all media education. As was reinforced in the experimental results, students exposed to a media literacy curriculum attained the “skills” advocated by media literacy education. The first part of the model assures that skill attainment remains the prerequisite for further learning experiences.

The model next addresses the transfer from skill attainment to qualitative learning outcomes. Media literate students should *understand* the social influences of media, *reflect* on the complex functions of media, and be *aware* of the civic necessity of a media system. The results of the focus group discussions revealed a void in the relationship between media skills and critical understanding of media’s societal and democratic functions. This void was filled largely with brash negativism towards the media industry.

Within the “media literacy classroom circle” are a series of guidelines for post-secondary media literacy educators. Supported by the results of this study, these outcomes-based guidelines provide concrete classroom teaching techniques

intended to operationalize the connections between the skills and dispositions of media literacy education. They can also help define the existence of media literacy in the university by offering specific teaching methods that may provide a common framework for the existence of a post-secondary media literacy education.

The end result of a media literacy model for the university is the media literate citizen. A student exposed to the core teaching philosophies of media literacy should be reflective, understanding, aware, and, eventually *literate* of the ways in which media function in civil society. A shift from assuming skills lead to such outcomes to actually building methodologies to address these outcomes may lead to a more cognizant idea of what students are really learning. These outcomes are the crux of a media literacy education. Assuming they occur is dangerous. This model is an attempt to assure that these outcomes are met.

DISCUSSION

What are Students Really Learning?

The results of this study evoke numerous implications for the future of media literacy education. What should a media literate student look like? What are the barriers to entry for post-secondary media literacy education? How can media

literacy be successfully implemented into a curriculum? This study is a starting point for dialogue that addresses these issues.

This study also asks a more general educational inquiry: what are students taking away from the classroom? Media educators spend countless hours engaging students with various broadcast, print, and online media in order to initiate critical discussion and analysis. Less frequently do media educators stop and ponder how students civically engage with media based on such learning experiences. How do they think about community? How do they understand media's responsibilities in a democracy? Do they see local, national, and global leaders in a new light? Do they question political choices concerning controversial subjects, i.e., abortion, health care, immigration? Do they understand what voting for a certain initiative means in light of how media outlets portray the issue?

The crux of post-secondary media literacy education is not only that students can perform well on an exam about media or write a strong critique of a media message, but that they gain the ability to transfer their classroom performance into critical thought about the role of information in society and its implications for them as participants in civil society. Overseeing this transfer has never been a prerequisite for teaching or learning about media.

This study has revealed some of the potential shortcomings associated with not teaching for the transfer of critical skills to critical reflection and civic awareness. The experimental inquiry found that the students enrolled in the media literacy course (n=170) increased their ability to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze media messages in print, video, and audio formats as compared to the control group (n=69). This result was anticipated. The focus groups, however, revealed cause for concern.

Students enrolled in the J175 course did not associate skills with a critical understanding of media's social and civic functions. Rather, their newfound skills transferred into cynical and defensive discourse. The students seemed to feel that their exposure to a media literacy curriculum enabled them to confidently and critically defend themselves against "the media."

This translated into often reactionary and negative comments towards media—results that distinguish the *informed skeptic* from the *informed cynic*.

The difference between the *informed skeptic* and the *informed cynic* is at the core of media literacy education. Media literacy should breed *informed skeptics*—media consumers critical but understanding of how and why media works as it does, and aware of media's social, civic, and democratic responsibilities. *Informed skeptics* question media intentions. They seek information for issues most pertinent to their lives and their democratic existences. They question with the aim to be further enlightened, empowered, critical, and supportive of the media—in a way that helps spur reform, accountability, and an overall better media industry.

The results of this study, however, revealed that the media literacy students reflected *informed cynics*—critical but unable to connect critical media viewing with the necessary understanding of media’s central role in society. *Informed cynics* are sensitized to the media’s negative traits, and thus take assumingly pessimistic stances towards media. They become reactionary, defensive and blame-centered. This is neither a productive nor intended outcome of media literacy in the university.

In their new publication, *UnSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation*, Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2007) caution their readers to “be skeptical, but not cynical:”

The skeptic demands evidence, and rightly so. The cynic assumes that what he or she is being told is false. Throughout this book we’ve been urging you to be skeptical of factual claims, to demand and weigh the evidence and to keep your mind open. But too many people mistake cynicism for skepticism. Cynicism is a form of gullibility—the cynic rejects facts without evidence, just as the naïve person accepts facts without evidence. And deception born of cynicism can be just as costly or potentially as dangerous to health and well-being as any other form of deception. (p. 175).

This divide represents the gulf in the learning outcomes of a media literacy course. If there is no association between critical skills and critical awareness of media’s civic and social responsibilities, then what real learning experiences have occurred?

Fortunately, this is not a problem inherent in media literacy, but perhaps born from a lack of direction. The findings above seem to reflect an educational entity that is still growing and attempting to find its place in the university. These outcomes are not inherently tied to the structural foundations of media literacy itself. Offering platforms, frameworks, and curricular avenues for discussions going forward can help the unintended consequences of a post-secondary media literacy curriculum be acknowledged and reformed.

CONCLUSION

Separating Cynics from Skeptics

It is rather premature to attempt to provide a concrete single foundation that connects media literacy education to media literate citizenship. More rigorous research, exploration, and evaluation are needed. This study is only the beginning.

However, it is the beginning of a discussion that has at its core the defense of good citizenship and participatory democracy.

University students are poised to become the leaders of progressive societies around the world. They will uphold the foundations that provide future generations the same freedoms past publics' have been afforded. They are the same adults who will be providing present generations with the means to grow old in peace and be granted protection, freedom, and civility.

Cynical dispositions towards media are perhaps commonplace in the university. Most students in their late-teens and early-twenties are engaging with new lifestyles, new knowledge, new understandings, and new ideologies. They are quizzical and critical, ready to question and judge at any point they see fit. One challenge of post-secondary education is to aid such inquiring minds in channeling their curiosities into rational and engaging thought. They are expected to confront the dominant political, cultural and ideological structures in society. Educators must make such confrontations knowledgeable, logical, and informed.

The challenge of the university is both immediate and longitudinal. Students must see the complexities of society in each specific course they take. They must also combine their course experiences to form a rational understanding of their personal world and the larger world around them.

This exploration is not reflective of all or any single part of a post-secondary institution. Nor is it representative of any particular course or department. It does, however, speak to the aim of media literacy education. The experiences here, however small, point to a general concern. At the conclusion of a media literacy course, students should be able to critically analyze media. They should further be able to connect their newfound analytic abilities to the media that they see outside of the classroom. This includes looking “deeper” at media, but it also includes looking “smarter” at media. It means understanding that cynicism rarely produces change or reform. It means understanding that every individual in Western society is dependent on media for local and global information. It means adopting and adapting such information to become an aware media citizen. Only then will the true benefits of media literacy become apparent.

In the meantime, students learn skills but not significance. Educators must not stop to think they have succeeded based on test scores and essay analyses. They must ask if they have succeeded in enlightening students with the ability to be both critical and aware; both skeptical and informed.

This study was not entirely negative. Half of the post-secondary media literacy puzzle is complete. Effective educational outcomes were attained. Media literacy advocates will be pleased to see such large-scale experimental results in favor of media literacy education in the university. They can point to the attainment of the necessary skills students “need” to become critical media consumers. These points

should not be lost in the larger concerns of the dispositions that accompany those skills. As this study discovered, students increased their ability to analyze, evaluate, and comprehend broadcast, print, and online media messages. This is a significant beginning for advocating the implementation of media literacy in the university.

Beyond Cynicism: How Media Literacy Can Make Students More Engaged Citizens is a call to media literacy scholars, university administrators, and educators in general, to ask themselves, “What are my students learning”? Media literacy is an approach to a form of media education that allows students to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media, but also to understand what these media abilities mean to students’ larger values, views, opinions, and beliefs. If this transfer is not addressed, media education runs the risk of never truly educating.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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