

**Media, Information Communication Technologies (ICT), and Youth Literacies:  
A Cultural Studies Perspective**

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[This article appears in *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2004, 48(1), 78-83]

Youth of all ages, from the preadolescent to the adolescent, use media in conjunction with various information communication technologies (e.g., the Internet, instant messaging, and e-mail) to communicate with their peers and relatives, to stay current in what matters to them, to shop, to relax, to create personal Web pages, and, yes, to complete homework assignments, among other things. For these youth, being a participant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century equates to being literate in media and ICT in ways that exceed what many of their classroom teachers know or even consider worth knowing.

Although the notion that literacy is reinventing itself through new hypermedia and digital technologies (Luke & Elkins, 1998) is no longer novel, it continues to have enormous implications for teachers at the middle and high school level, as does the fact that these new media/technologies are fundamentally and irreversibly affecting how ideas get represented in texts and communicated (Alvermann, 2004; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). Central to much of the discussion surrounding new media and ICT use is the perceived need to develop young people's critical awareness of how all authored texts (print, visual, and oral) situate them as readers, writers, and viewers within particular cultural and historical contexts. At the same time, developing youth's critical

awareness suggests teaching students that all texts, including their textbooks, routinely promote or silence particular views.

This is not a call, however, for instruction that would have students searching for the villains or heroes in their texts, for the oppressors or emancipators among us (Morgan, 1997). Rather, as Morgan has pointed out, doing away with these overly simplistic categories would give teachers and students alike an opportunity to “develop a different view of how people may act, provisionally, at a particular time and within particular conditions” (p. 26). It would also offer an opportunity to explore the contingencies of working within a hypermedia environment. The term *hypermedia*, which is an amalgam of *hypertext* and *multimedia* (Semali & Pailliotet, 1999), refers to the links available to readers as they move between computer windows and a mix of media texts, such as sounds, images, words, movies, and the like. Over a decade ago, Jay Bolter (1991), a literacy expert in hypertext applications, observed that above all else, becoming literate in a hypermedia environment challenges the notion that any single text represents an author’s complete, separate, or unique expression.

### **A Cultural Studies Perspective**

Instructional approaches that pay attention to the impact of media and information communication technologies on today’s youth vary according to the theories from which they derive. This brief essay limits the discussion to a single theoretical perspective, namely, one that focuses on the historically informed cultural contexts of a hypermedia environment. Because we live in a culture that shapes and is shaped by social practices, political views, recreational pursuits, and the very identities we forge (Kellner, 1995), media and ICT literacies are often defined broadly as the study of text, political economy,

audience, and production (Luke, 1997). The degree to which one of these four elements is emphasized over another in the research literature varies.

For example, media literacy may be viewed as a special form of reading and writing—one that focuses primarily on analyzing the messages that producers of mass media send (Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 1997; Hobbs, 2001; Messaris, 1994). Alternatively, it may be viewed as interested in the subversive uses to which audiences put popular culture texts (de Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1989), or, in the viewer/reader/listener cultures that form around both the production and consumption of popular culture texts, including readers' pleasures in and the social practices derived from their use of these texts (Hagood, 2001; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Luke, 1997; McRobbie, 1997; Myers, Hammett, & McKillop, 2000).

The epistemological underpinnings of media and ICT literacies, especially those that are associated with an online networked environment, vary according to the social, cultural, and political forces that have been at work historically in the decades leading up to the present. For example, the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a series of ideological struggles over issues related to media production and consumption. From the 1940s through the mid 1980s, scholars who worked within critical theory and mass communications perspectives generally assumed that forces of media production dominated audiences' consumption of texts, largely through social engineering and psychological manipulation (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1993).

Writing from the standpoint of what came to be called the Frankfurt School, these scholars described audiences as being easily taken in or “duped” by coercive power arrangements operating within the media establishment. The analytic tools they used for

identifying such arrangements focused attention on how print and nonprint textual images reflected certain ideological stances believed to be oppressive to certain groups of people (e.g., women and Blacks) while maintaining the status quo, or even furthering the goals, of other more powerful groups (see Pietila, 1994, for a critical history of mass communications studies). The thinking that is representative of this era, which was strongly influenced by a particular school of critical theorists, focused on heightening audiences' awareness of media production as a form of manipulation.

In the 1990s, building on Ang's (1985), Messaris's (1981), and Willis's (1974) earlier work with audiences and their everyday uses of popular culture (de Certeau, 1984; Williams, 1965), several scholars in British media studies who have an interest in youth literacy development (e.g., Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Lusted, 1991; Sefton-Green, 1998) moved from critiquing the production of media texts to studying young people's uses of them. This move, aided by the growing influence of cultural studies as an academic specialty area, turned attention away from deconstructing popular culture texts for their ideological messages and toward analyzing the politics of pleasure produced when audiences create their own texts. Not surprisingly, in turn, this shift in attention toward a study of audiences' pleasures attracted its own set of critics. Kellner (1995), for example, was prompted to add this cautionary note to the ongoing discussion: "Celebrating the audience and the pleasures of the popular, neglecting social class, ...and failing to analyze...the politics of cultural texts will make cultural studies merely another academic subdivision, harmless and ultimately of benefit primarily to the culture industries themselves" (p. 42).

### **Implications for Classroom Instruction**

This brief history of the ideological struggles inherent in most of the research on media and ICT literacies is relevant to understanding the present tensions in teacher education circles. Some literacy teacher educators would argue that the relevancy of focusing on youth's engagement in an online networked environment for building competence and achieving success in school is questionable, or marginal at best. This group of educators would opt largely for focusing on the more conventional print-based and textbook-driven curricula to which they are accustomed.

However, others (e.g., Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) are concerned that if classroom teachers largely ignore the influence of media and ICT literacies on youth's functioning both in and out of school, they may fail to benefit from insights that could be learned from tapping into literacies that count in today's youth culture. This is not a thinly veiled argument to bring young people's out-of-school literacies into the classroom. Quite the opposite, in fact, for any attempt by educators to co-opt youth culture would largely be rejected (and rightly so) by the individuals within that culture.

What might very well be a compromise situation would be one in which a variety of texts from print-based and digitally mediated environments are examined as part of the current school curriculum. For example, teachers might focus students' attention on questions and problem-solving activities such as the following:

- Are hypertext readings privileged in ways that traditional (linear) readings are not? For example, do hypertexts allow readers to make multiple interpretations of what they read with greater ease than do traditional

texts? If so, what might be the consequences of this privileging? What kind of reader would stand to benefit? Who might fail to benefit?

- How does hypertext create opportunities for readers to manipulate information in ways that are unavailable to them in print-based media?

What are the trade-offs in working within such an environment?

Having presented a case for being more inclusive of what counts as school literacy, I must also acknowledge that the extent to which new media and interactive communication technologies effectively support literacy teaching and learning in classrooms is unknown. There is little empirical research on the topic generally, and even less that applies specifically to instruction at the middle and high school level (Kamil, Intrator, & Kim, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000). Still, from the work that has been done (and synthesized by Kamil et al., 2000; Leu, 2000), there is promising evidence of the effectiveness of literacy instruction that integrates hypermedia, hypertext, the Internet, and other ICTs. This is especially the case among populations of second-language readers. There is also evidence that adolescents are making valuable reading-writing connections in their bid to communicate in a computer-mediated world (e.g., Alvermann, 2001; Beach & Bruce, 2004; Beach & Lundell, 1998; Horney & Anderson-Inman, 1994).

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