

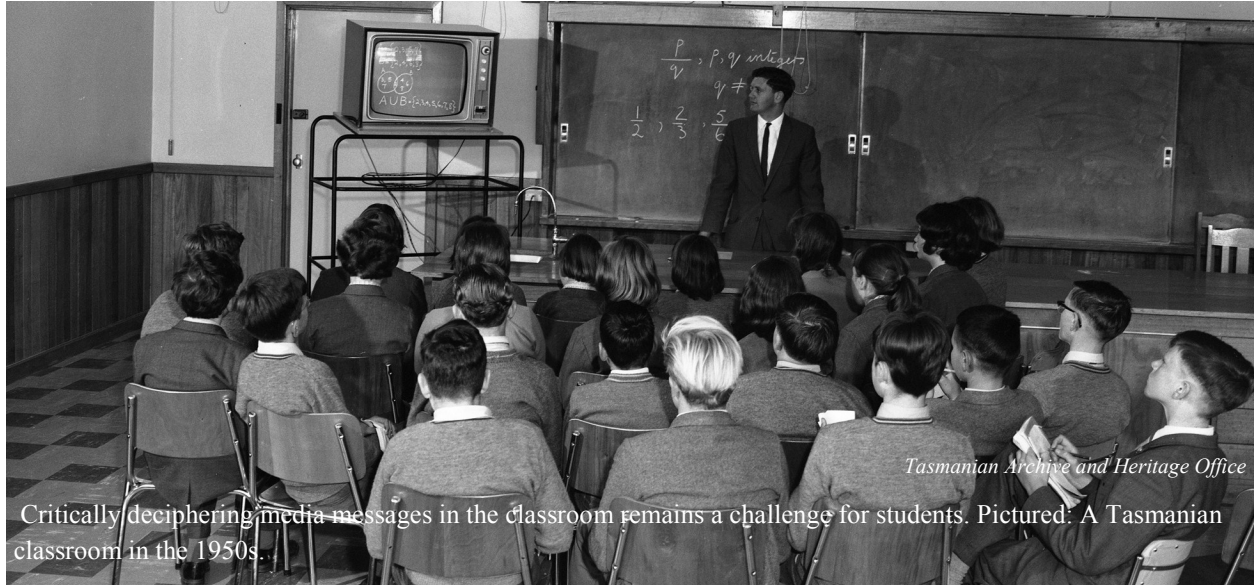
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# Teaching Nuance: The Need for Media Literacy in the Digital Age

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Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office

Critically deciphering media messages in the classroom remains a challenge for students. Pictured: A Tasmanian classroom in the 1950s.

## Teaching Nuance

The Need for Media Literacy in the Digital Age



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Kubey: "The United States finds itself in the ironic position of being the world's leading exporter of media products while simultaneously lagging behind every other major English-speaking country in the formal delivery of media education in its schools. This is not pure coincidence." via *Television and New Media*, 2003

Today's students are not being equipped with the critical thinking and analysis skills they need to successfully navigate our media-saturated environment. Time spent consuming media, now up to nearly eight hours a day, continues to increase, but students often are poorly versed in analyzing and understanding different media messages and formats. They prefer to see the world of media messages as simple and straightforward, to be taken at face value, according to recent research in the field of media literacy. While students express confidence that media messages have clear primary meanings and sources that can be easily identified, media literacy demands nuanced thinking about message creators as well as their goals and values.

As policymakers grapple over how to deploy technology in classrooms, they should beware of producing generations of students drowning in digital devices without enough good ideas about what to do with them.

Since the emergence of the modern media literacy movement in the early 1990s, scholars and educators have struggled to define the field and establish standards for what it means to be media literate. A growing body of research, including my own work with colleagues published in the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* and *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, finds support for the idea that young people, while sometimes fluent in technologies used in and out of the classroom, often struggle to decipher media messages. But what exactly should students learn and what are the best methods for teaching media literacy? How can teachers know when they have been effective? How can teachers help students become motivated and engaged rather than disaffected and cynical?

In the K-12 environment, the United States lags behind a variety of other developed nations in deploying media education standards. Nonetheless, all 50 states now include some mention of digital media literacy, and the new Common Core State Standards, which Idaho has adopted along with 44 other states, focus broad attention on media education: "To be ready for college, workforce training and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather,

comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, report on and create a high volume and extensive range of print and non-print texts in media forms old and new.” These are good, broad goals for instruction and assessment, but what should this actually look like on the ground in classrooms?

A range of different disciplinary approaches to media literacy exist, as media education scholar Renee Hobbs described. Some scholars and educators focus on “information literacy,” with attention to technical and research skills, the use of digital tools, including video and photo editing, online search engines, identifying



*John Kelly*  
In a Boise State classroom, educational technology lecturer Chris Haskell, left, discusses an assignment with a student.

keywords and developing hypotheses. A different approach known as “critical literacy” includes a focus on social and political contexts and can be understood to include differences between American and other media systems, economic imperatives, media ownership and control issues, and the techniques used by media marketers. Both approaches are essential, but our research suggests that students aren’t getting enough of the latter approach, which can be seen as a means for improving not only individual media consumption goals but also for improving citizenship and the conditions of democracy.

In her 1994 paper “Introduction: Critical media pedagogy and the public sphere.” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 18(2), 5-7



Stuart Ewen at Hunter College suggested that media literacy should be viewed as “an education in techniques that can democratize the realm of public expression and will magnify the possibility of meaningful public interactions.” Lisa McLaughlin, now at Miami University criticized traditional media education, noting in a 1994 paper that “critical pedagogy seeks to move beyond the mere description of the status quo and to offer new ways of thought and practice that provide students with new ‘ways of seeing,’ with the goal that they might become empowered to form their own challenges in the arena of public life.” Others, including Rose A. Dyson, a Canadian media activist and scholar, have suggested that media literacy is necessary because media corporations have not done their part to serve the public interest. In these theoretical contexts, media literacy requires much more than the use of digital tools to navigate the media landscape; technological savvy must be accompanied by informed critical analysis.

Helping young Americans develop their media literacy should be the goal of teachers, parents, researchers, administrators and policymakers. We should work together to make it easier for young people to navigate the changing media landscape and build skills that will last a lifetime. Media literacy should continue to be incorporated into primary, secondary and higher education curricula, and teachers should continue to find ways to emphasize media literacy in their own classrooms. Three key points can be used immediately by teachers in the classroom and over the long term in the curriculum development process.

## MINDFUL CONSUMPTION

Previous theoretical and empirical research suggests that critical thinking and conscious processing of information are important components of media literacy. Young people must be taught to be active and mindful in their media consumption rather than relying on automatic processing habits. This means asking questions about media content rather than accepting messages at face value. This also means being an active consumer of information and making conscious consumption decisions rather than passively consuming whatever is most easily and readily available. Students should learn to develop and articulate their own personal goals for consuming media content, and they should be able to assess whether those goals are being met by the content they consume.

## MEDIA SYSTEM KNOWLEDGE

It's certainly important to be able to evaluate media content, but doing so requires structural knowledge of how the media system operates. Research suggests that students know little about the economic realities of media such as the roles of advertising, profit orientations and ownership issues. Students should also learn about content formats and frames, including knowledge of media routines that influence the message construction process. Media effects constitute another important knowledge area. Some students seem to instinctively understand the potential effects of the disconnect between media representations and reality, but most need active instruction in this area.

## INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

It's easy to blame media for their faults and shortcomings, but it's more important that students know how to take responsibility for their media consumption. Students who do so are better able to determine whether they receive credible information and whether they become accurately informed. Students who understand their role in making consumption choices and are aware of the need to examine diverse sources are more likely to be appropriately skeptical of media content. Students should learn to connect their consumption behaviors with their knowledge about media systems and structures. Only then can they be in control of their individual message consumption and processing. As media scholar Marshall McLuhan famously pointed out, humans live in constructed media environments as unconsciously as fish in water. Media literacy educators must help students understand and analyze media constructions of reality, which sometimes offer incomplete or inaccurate portrayals of the world we live in. Media literacy education begins with awareness and analysis but culminates in reflection and engagement. The ultimate goal of media literacy is empowerment.

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### Further Reading

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The views and opinions expressed here are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of Boise State University or the College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs.