

RESEARCH DESIGN LITERATURE REVIEW

SENSE-MAKING METHODOLOGY, MEDIA LITERACY AND SINGAPORE: LESSONS FROM THE ASIAN CONTEXT

by

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1. THE PHENOMENON

As digital media continue to spread around the globe, so too does the chorus of voices advocating the diffusion of media literacy training among international populations. Media literacy (ML) is usually conceptualized as a set of skills related to the consumption and production of electronically or mechanically media messages, encompassing film, television, radio, and -- more recently -- the Internet (Schaefer, 1999). Given the growing pervasiveness of digital media (Gitlin, 2002), proponents argue that these skills are needed to promote informed citizenries capable of making informed economic or political decisions. Merowitz (2000) argues that such skills include three components: content literacy – an understanding of mediated messages, symbols, genres, styles, etc.; grammar literacy – an awareness of production techniques and trends used in the creation of messages; and medium literacy – an understanding of the social-political-economic contexts of messages. Additionally, as Hobbs (1998) points out, ML is often promoted as essential for the proper functioning of democracy.

2. THE DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

Such conceptualizations have had a long history, particularly in the west. Although the broad nature of the literature – ranging from quantitative, effects-oriented research to critical-cultural, post-modernist work – defies easy classification, for the purposes of this paper, the discourse community can be compartmentalized into three broad foci: (a) skills; (b) education; and (c) theory and effects.

Skills-oriented literature focuses on defining the components of media literacy. Perhaps the best-known and most-cited authors in the past decade include Livingstone (2004), Hobbs (1997), and Aufderheide (1993). Livingstone (2004) recently defined media literacy as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in a variety of forms" (p. 5). This definition echoed Hobbs (1997), who argued that ML included the ability to "[a]ccess, [a]nalyze, [e]valuate, and [c]ommunicate" (p. 166), and Aufderheide (1993), who defined ML as the "ability to decode, analyze, and produce both print and electronic media [which encompasses] informed citizenship, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social

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advocacy, self-esteem, and consumer competence" (p. 1). Such definitions were the focus of a special issue of the *Journal of Communication* in 1998 (see Rubin, 1998), which sought to identify the changing nature of ML in relation to digital technologies. In general, most of this literature has highlighted the components of consumption (access, analysis, evaluation) and production (communication).

The media education literature consists of curricula designed to teach ML. In the late 1970s, the United State Office of Education (USOE) funded several scholars (e.g., Dondis, 1981; Corder-Boltz, 1980) who published media education curricula; much of this work was summarized in a special issue of the *Journal of Communication* (see Anderson, 1980). This work was enhanced by Ploghoft and Anderson (1982) and Masterman (1980; 1985), among others. Brown (1991) and Kubey (1997) summarized a handful of international media education programmes – including those in Europe and South America -- that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, providing ample evidence of the diffusion of media pedagogy.

The theory and effects literature consists of philosophical and empirical work that informs ML scholars. This eclectic corpus includes classic empirical studies focusing on the impact of media in society (e.g., Schramm, Lyle, and Parker, 1960; Liebert, Sprafkin, and Davidson, 1986) as well as theoretical, critical-cultural analyses that have drawn upon prominent theorists like Habermas, Friere, Gramsci, and Mulvey (see Newcomb, 2000 for a comprehensive summary). The divergent interests in this literature have led to polarization in the field, with one camp embracing a critical-cultural perspective (e.g., Lewis and Jhally, 2000) and the other avoiding or criticizing it (e.g., Hobbs, 1997; Hobbs, 1998).

3. BROAD BRUSH STROKE PICTURE OF THE PHENOMENA AS IT IS NOW UNDERSTOOD

Thus, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, ML had become firmly established in academic circles as a legitimate area of research and pedagogy, supported by a general acceptance of the deterministic power of media to shape society at both the macro and micro levels. Such acceptance was fueled by a century of research on the effects of political communication, propaganda, advertising, violence, and sexually explicit content. As the introduction of new technologies sparked moral panics, media pedagogy was usually trumpeted as the means by which to protect hapless populations against undesirable effects. In the U.S., this trend was clearly seen with film in the 1920s, television in the 1950s and 1970s, cable in the 1980s, and the Internet and computer games in the 1990s.

4. WHY RESEARCH/PRACTICE RELATING TO THIS PHENOMENA IS NOT "ENOUGH" AS THINGS STAND NOW

Useful as this literature has been, it tends to reinforce a transportation or conduit-based conceptualization of ML: messages are essentially *things* to be transported neutrally via electronic or mechanical systems; citizens potentially lack the skill to accurately decode or use the media and are in need of training (see Dervin, 2003 for a critique of this perspective).

Given the often narrow conceptualization of ML to date, theoretical approaches to the study of the phenomenon have been predictably limited. Additionally, there have been relatively few studies that have attempted to link theoretical discussions with empirical findings.

Further, although a wealth of literature exists on ML within the west, very little has been done in Asia. As new communication technologies – particularly satellite-fed cable television and Internet services – have diffused in the region, governments have sounded the alarm, complaining about the potential impact of western ideology on local practices, particularly among the young.

Such debates have emerged recently in both China and Singapore, countries that have regularly censored outside media. China hosted its first-ever media literacy conference in October 2004 to promote the adoption of curricula designed to inoculate teens against the perceived negative impact of digital media (China Daily, 2004).

In 2003, the Singaporean government established the Media Development Authority (MDA) to facilitate, in part, the integration of the expanding media landscape into the existing, censored social structure. As part of its mandate, the MDA established guidelines to promote media literacy, which they defined as “the ability to use the media from a technical point of view, as well as the ability to critically assess the mass of information that is presented” (Media Development Authority, 2004, para. 1). The MDA outlined four key steps to address:

- *awareness of media literacy among the public
- *the need for the public to recognize that they could play a part in being media literate consumers,
- *enabling consumers to analyse the media messages presented, and
- *encouraging the media literate public to take action by making an informed and educated choice, so as to support quality content for themselves and of the industry. (MDA, 2004, para. 3)

More recently, the MDA removed the production component from their definition, restricting ML to “the ability to critically assess information that one receives daily” (para. 1), and the creation of “a media savvy population through various media education programmes” (Media Development Authority, 2005, para. 2).

Also noticeably absent was any reference to democracy. As Bannerjee and Yeo (2003) have noted, such an omission would not necessarily be unexpected: their research found that Singaporeans were generally apathetic regarding democratic processes despite the rapid influx of digital media. This finding reinforced similar results reported by Kuo et al. (2002) that suggested the need for additional research on the link between ML and democracy within the Singaporean context.

Hence, the fact that ML has not been studied in Singapore despite massive diffusion of digital media indicates a major gap in the literature. What is needed is a methodology that allows a reconceptualization of ML as an active, grounded process that can be studied in relation to democracy within a globalized context.

5. REASON SENSE-MAKING METHODOLOGY INFORMED RESEARCH/ PRACTICE MIGHT BE USEFUL

Given its focus upon the dynamic and grounded nature of communicative phenomena, Sense-Making Methodology (Dervin, Forman-Wernet, and Lauterbach, 2003) provides a potentially useful avenue for researching media literacy.

To reconceptualize ML as an active, grounded process within a globalized media context, I draw upon Sense-Making Methodology to operationally define *Global Media Literacy* (GML) as *the ability of human agents to positively structure the trajectories*

of communication systems. Such structuring takes place via the constellation of verbings utilized by human agents when encountering media systems.

Such a broad definition would allow grounded study of the processes by which Singaporeans produce and reproduce media-related social structures, which, as suggested by Dervin and Clark (2003) include verbings related to democratic practices. The goal of this research project would be to develop a grounded taxonomy of media practices (verbings) utilized by agents within specific time-space contexts, in this case – the globalized Asian media environment.

6. POTENTIAL RESEARCH QUESTION

Given the research context and goals addressed above, I propose the following research questions:

In what ways do Singaporeans practice global media literacy?

What impact do these practices have on democratic processes in the city-state?

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