



## **Critical Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Reconstruction of Education**

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Date: 2007  
Series Number: PPBP015-X024-2007

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Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2007). Critical media literacy, democracy, and the reconstruction of education. In D. Macedo & S.R. Steinberg (Eds.), *Media literacy: A reader* (pp. 3-23). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

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## **Abstract**

This chapter explores the theoretical underpinnings of critical media literacy and analyzes four different approaches to teaching it. Combining cultural studies with critical pedagogy, Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share argue that critical media literacy aims to expand the notion of literacy to include different forms of media culture, information and communication technologies and new media, as well as deepen the potential of literacy education to critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, information and power. A multiperspectival approach addressing issues of gender, race, class and power is used to explore the interconnections of media literacy, cultural studies and critical pedagogy. In the interest of a vibrant participatory democracy, educators need to move the discourse beyond the stage of debating whether or not critical media literacy should be taught, and instead focus energy and resources on exploring the best ways for implementing it.

## Chapter 1

**Critical Media Literacy,  
Democracy, and  
the Reconstruction  
of Education**

Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share

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**Introduction**

The world we live in today is very different than the world that most of us remember from our childhood. The twenty-first century is a media saturated, technologically dependent, and globally connected world. However, most education in the United States has not kept up with advances in technology or educational research. In our global information society, it is insufficient to teach students to read and write only with letters and numbers. We live in a multimedia age where the majority of information people receive comes less often from print sources and more typically from highly constructed visual images, complex sound arrangements, and multiple media formats. The influential role that broadcasting and emergent information and computer media play in organizing, shaping, and disseminating information, ideas, and values is creating a powerful *public pedagogy* (Giroux, 1999; Luke, 1997). These changes in technology, media, and society require the development of critical media literacy to empower students and citizens to adequately read media messages and produce media themselves in order to be active participants in a democratic society (Kellner, 1995; Kellner & Share, 2005).

Even so, despite the ubiquity of media culture in contemporary society and everyday life, and despite criticism of the distorted values, ideals, and representations of the world in popular culture, media education in K-12 schooling in the United States has never really been established and developed. The current technological revolution, however, brings to the fore, more than ever, the role of media like television, popular music, film, and advertising, as the Internet rapidly absorbs these cultural forms and creates ever-evolving cyberspaces and emergent forms of culture and pedagogy.

It is highly irresponsible in the face of saturation by the Internet and media culture to ignore these forms of socialization and education. Consequently, a critical reconstruction of education should produce pedagogies that provide media literacy and enable students, teachers, and citizens to discern the nature and effects of media culture. From this perspective, media culture is a form of pedagogy that teaches proper and improper behavior, gender roles, values, and knowledge of the world. Individuals are often not aware that they are being educated and positioned by media culture, as its pedagogy is frequently invisible and is absorbed unconsciously. This situation calls for critical approaches that make us aware of how media construct meanings, influence and educate audiences, and impose their messages and values.

Critical media literacy expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication and popular culture as well as deepens the potential of education to critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, information and power. It involves cultivating skills in analyzing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts. Media literacy helps people to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to construct alternative media.

In this chapter, we explore different approaches commonly used for teaching media education and propose a conception of critical media literacy that moves media education into the sphere of twenty-first-century transformative pedagogy. We present competing approaches to media education and, building on these conceptions, develop a critical media literacy addressing issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, and power to explore the interconnections of media, cultural studies, and critical pedagogy. We argue that alternative media production can help engage students to challenge media texts and narratives that appear natural and transparent. In the contemporary era of standardized high stakes testing and corporate structuring of public education, radical democracy depends on a Deweyan reconceptualization of literacy and the role of education in society. We argue that critical media literacy must expand our understanding of literacy so that these ideas become integrated across the curriculum at all levels from pre-school to university, leading to a reconstruction and democratization of education and society.

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## Literacies

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Literacy involves gaining the skills and knowledge to read, interpret, produce texts and arti-

facts, and to gain the intellectual tools and capacities to fully participate in one's culture and society. Both traditionalists and reformists would probably agree that education and literacy are intimately connected. "Literacy," in our conception, comprises gaining competencies involved in effectively learning and using socially constructed forms of communication and representation. Because literacies are socially constructed in various institutional discourses and practices within educational and cultural sites, cultivating literacies involves attaining competencies in practices in contexts that are governed by rules and conventions. Literacies evolve and shift in response to social and cultural change and the interests of elites who control hegemonic institutions, as well as to the emergence of new technologies.

To the domains of reading, writing, and traditional print literacies, one could argue that in an era of technological revolution educators must develop robust forms of media literacy, computer literacy, and multimedia literacies, thus cultivating "multiple literacies" in the restructuring of education.<sup>1</sup> Computer and multimedia technologies demand novel skills and competencies, and if education is to be relevant to the problems and challenges of contemporary life, engaged teachers must expand the concept of literacy and develop new curricula and pedagogies.

We would resist, however, extreme claims that the era of the book and print literacy are over. Although there are new media and literacies in the current constellation, books, reading, and print literacy continue to be of utmost significance. Indeed, in the current information-communication technology environment, traditional print literacy takes on increasing importance in the computer-mediated cyberworld as people need to critically scrutinize and scroll tremendous amounts of information, putting new emphasis on developing reading and writing abilities. For instance, Internet discussion groups, chat rooms, e-mail, text-messaging, blogs, wikis, and various Internet forums require writing skills in which a new emphasis on the importance of clarity and precision is emerging.<sup>2</sup> In this context of information saturation, it becomes an ethical imperative not to contribute to cultural and information overload and to concisely communicate thoughts and feelings.

The traditional ideas of literacy that focus on a standard national language and phonetic decoding are no longer sufficient in an age of proliferating communication systems and increasing linguistic and cultural diversity (The New London Group, 1996). The psychological model of reading and writing as individual cognitive skills needs to advance to a deeper understanding of literacy as a social practice "tied up in the politics and power relations of everyday life in literate cultures" (Luke & Freebody, 1997, p. 185).

Today, novel forms of media and technoculture are proliferating and evolving as technology develops and spreads. These changes in technology and society have led to a call for a broader approach to literacy by many, including The New London Group (1996) whose members propose a pedagogy of "multiliteracies" to address multiple cultural and linguistic differences, as well as the multitude of communication media; advocates of "silicon literacies" to engage new computers, information, communication, and entertainment technologies (see, for example, Snyder, 2002); or advocacy of "multiple literacies" to take account of the full range of proliferating and emergent technologies (Kellner, 1998, 2004).

These scholars suggest that media literacy is one of the many literacies that students need in the twenty-first century to participate more effectively in the democratic process. We agree with these perspectives and in the following analysis suggest how critical media literacy can reconstruct education for the contemporary era, expand the concept of literacy, and contribute to the radical democratization of education and society.

## Approaches to Media Education

While there is growing interest in the need for media literacy, there is also much debate about *why* and *how* to teach it (Hobbs, 1998). Four major approaches to media education have appeared, which we will discuss, and then sketch out our own conception of critical media literacy. Just as we suggest that new literacies studies should build on and not leave behind traditional print media, so too do we argue that development of new multiple literacies should build upon and not abandon contributions within the field of media education that have emerged to counter the growing impact of broadcasting media.

### Protectionist Approach

One approach to media education emerges from fear of media and aims to protect or inoculate people against the dangers of media manipulation and addiction. This *protectionist approach* posits media audiences as passive victims and values traditional print culture over media culture as exemplified by Neil Postman (1985) in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman warns that TV has become a powerful force of pedagogy that dominates the attention, time, and cognitive habits of young people. Many activists on both sides of the political spectrum come to media education as a way to push their agenda through blaming the media. Some conservatives blame the media for causing teen pregnancies and the destruction of family values while some on the left criticize the media for rampant consumerism and making children materialistic. Critics of this anti-media approach suggest that it will cause students to either regurgitate “politically correct” responses to media critiques or reject the ideas of media literacy altogether (Buckingham, 1994).

While we are not claiming that media do not contribute to and at times cause many social problems, we take issue with this approach because of its decontextualization and anti-media bias which over-simplifies the complexity of our relationship with media and takes away the potential for empowerment that critical pedagogy and alternative media production offer. When the understanding of media effects is contextualized within its social and historical dynamics, then issues of representation and ideology are extremely useful to media education to explore the interconnections between media and society, information and power (Ferguson, 1998, 2004). This approach is important when it addresses the naturalizing processes of ideology and the interrelationships with social injustice, but it is deeply flawed when it does so through dogmatic orthodoxy and undemocratic pedagogy where teachers merely denounce the media and students are encouraged or coerced to follow this anti-media line.

## Media Arts Education

A second approach to teaching about media is present in media arts education, where students are taught to value the aesthetic qualities of media and the arts while using their creativity for self-expression through creating art and media. These programs can be found most often inside schools as stand-alone classes or outside of the classroom in community-based or after-school programs. While many of these programs are excellent examples of critical media literacy, we have concerns with the media arts approach that favors individualistic self-expression over socially conscious analysis and alternative media production. Education loses its transformative potential when programs unproblematically teach students the technical skills to merely reproduce hegemonic representations or express their voice without the awareness of ideological implications or any type of social critique.

Feminist standpoint theorists explain that coming to voice is important for people who have seldom been allowed to speak for themselves, but without critical analysis it is not enough (Collins, 2004; Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1997). Critical analysis that explores and exposes the structures of oppression is essential because merely coming to voice is something any racist or sexist group of people can also claim. Spaces must be opened up and opportunities created so that people in marginalized positions have the opportunity to collectively struggle against oppression, to voice their concerns, and create their own representations.

Incorporating the arts and media production into public school education holds important political benefits for making learning more experiential, hands-on, creative, expressive, and fun. Media arts education can bring pleasure and popular culture into mainstream education, thereby making school more motivating and relevant to students. When this approach moves beyond technical production skills or relativist art appreciation and is steeped in cultural studies that address issues of gender, race, class, and power, it holds dramatic potential for transformative critical media literacy.

## Media Literacy Movement

A third approach to media education can be found in the *media literacy movement* in the United States. While the movement is relatively small,<sup>3</sup> it has made some inroads into mainstream educational institutions and established two national membership organizations in the United States (Kellner & Share, 2005). According to the definition of media literacy provided by one of these organizations, “media literacy is seen to consist of a series of communication competencies, including the ability to ACCESS, ANALYZE, EVALUATE and COMMUNICATE.”<sup>4</sup> This approach attempts to expand the notion of literacy to include multiple forms of media (music, film, video, Internet, and so on) while still working within a print literacy tradition.

While we agree with the need to begin with these ideas of expanding our understanding of how we communicate with more than just printed words, this is not enough to bring about a democratic reconstruction of education and society. Robert Ferguson (1998) uses

the metaphor of an iceberg to explain the need for critical media analysis. Many educators working under an apolitical media literacy framework guide their students to only analyze the obvious and overt tip of the iceberg they see sticking out of the water. Ferguson asserts that this is a problem because “The vast bulk which is not immediately visible is the intellectual, historical and analytical base without which media analysis runs the risk of becoming superficial, mechanical or glib” (p. 2). The critical component of media literacy must transform literacy education into an exploration of the role of language and communication media in order to define relationships of power and domination because below the surface of that iceberg lie deeply embedded ideological notions of white supremacy, capitalist patriarchy, classism, homophobia, and other oppressive forces.

Many media educators working from a conventional media literacy approach openly express the myth that education can and should be politically neutral, and that their job is to objectively expose students to media content without questioning ideology and issues of power. Giroux writes, “The notion that theory, facts, and inquiry can be objectively determined and used falls prey to a set of values that are both conservative and mystifying in their political orientation” (1997, p. 11).

The mainstream appeal of the U.S. media literacy movement, something that it is only just starting to develop, can probably be linked to its conservative base that does not engage the political dimensions of education and especially literacy. While this ambiguous non-partisan stance helps the dissemination of media education, thereby making some of the ideas and tools available to more students, it also waters down the transformative potential for media education to become a powerful instrument to challenge oppression and strengthen democracy. The media literacy movement has done excellent work in promoting important concepts of semiotics and intertextuality, as well as bringing media culture into public education. However, without cultural studies, transformative pedagogy, and a project of radical democracy, media literacy risks becoming another cookbook of conventional ideas that only improve the social reproductive function of education.

## Critical Media Literacy

The type of critical media literacy that we propose includes aspects of the three previous models, but focuses on ideology critique and analyzing the politics of representation of crucial dimensions of gender, race, class, and sexuality; incorporating alternative media production; and expanding textual analysis to include issues of social context, control, and pleasure. A critical media literacy brings an understanding of ideology, power, and domination that challenges relativist and apolitical notions of much media education in order to guide teachers and students in their explorations of how power, media, and information are linked. This approach embraces the notion of the audience as active in the process of making meaning, as a cultural struggle between dominant readings, oppositional readings, or negotiated readings (Hall, 1980; Ang, 2002).

Critical media literacy thus constitutes a critique of mainstream approaches to literacy and a political project for democratic social change. This involves a multiperspectival crit-

ical inquiry of media culture and the cultural industries that address issues of class, race, gender, sexuality, and power and also promotes the production of alternative counter-hegemonic media. Media and information communication technology can be tools for empowerment when people who are most often marginalized or misrepresented in the mainstream media receive the opportunity to use these tools to tell their stories and express their concerns. For members of the dominant group, critical media literacy offers an opportunity to engage with the social realities that the majority of the world are experiencing. The new technologies of communication are powerful tools that can liberate or dominate, manipulate or enlighten, and it is imperative that educators teach their students how to critically analyze and use these media (Kellner, 2004a).

These different approaches to media education are not rigid pedagogical models, but they are rather interpretive reference points from which educators can frame their concerns and strategies. Calling for critical media literacy is important to identify the elements and objectives necessary for good media pedagogy, understanding that principles and programs may be different in varying contexts.

Alan Luke and Peter Freebody (1997) have been developing a dynamic understanding of literacy as a social practice where critical competence is one of the necessary components. This sociological framing of literacy as a *family of practices*, in which multiple practices are crucial and none alone is enough, fits well into our multiperspectival approach to critical media literacy. Luke and Freebody (1999) write that effective literacy requires four basic roles (not necessarily sequential or hierarchical) that allow learners to: “break the code,” “participate in understanding and composing,” “use texts functionally,” and “critically analyze and transform texts by acting on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral.” This normative approach offers the flexibility for literacy education to explore and critically engage students with the pedagogy that will work best for individual teachers in their own unique situation with the different social and cultural needs and interests of their students and local community.

When educators teach students critical media literacy, they often begin with media arts activities or simple decoding of media texts in the mode of the established media literacy movement, perhaps adding discussion of how audiences receive media messages. However, critical media literacy also engages students in exploring the depths of the iceberg with critical questions to challenge “commonsense” assumptions concerning the meaning of texts with negotiated and oppositional interpretations, as well as seeking alternative media with oppositional and counterhegemonic representations and messages, and, where feasible, teaching critical media literacy through production. While not everyone has the tools to create sophisticated media productions, we strongly recommend a pedagogy of teaching critical media literacy through project-based media production (even if it is as simple as rewriting a text or drawing pictures) for making analyses more meaningful and empowering as students gain tools for responding and taking action on the social conditions and texts they are critiquing. The goal should be to move toward critical media literacy with the understanding of literacy as a social process that involves multiple dimensions and interactions with multiple technologies and that is connected with the transformation of education and democratization of society.

For example, in her course on critical media literacy at UCLA, Rhonda Hammer has her students work in teams to create their own counterhegemonic movies and Web sites that explore issues they feel are underrepresented or misrepresented in the mainstream media (see Hammer, 2006).<sup>5</sup> During the ten-week quarter, her students produce movies and Web sites that challenge the “commonsense” assumptions about a wide assortment of issues dealing with gender, ethnicity, sexuality, politics, power, and pleasure. Through the dialectic of theory and practice, her students create critical alternative media while engaging the core concepts of critical media literacy as they apply to audience, text, and context.

Along with the media production, students are also required to do particular readings from the course reader, as well as produce a short analytical final paper in which they discuss their group project within the context of critical media literacy. They are asked to incorporate course readings, guest lectures, and films presented in the class. Notions of ideology and hegemony as well as the “politics of representation” in media (which includes dimensions of sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia, to name a few) are central concerns. Also, the ideas and realities of resistance, social and political change, and agency are emphasized.

## Feminism and Critical Media Literacy

Feminist theory and standpoint epistemologies provide major contributions to the field of critical media literacy. Carmen Luke (1994) combines cultural and feminist studies to allow for an “epistemological standpoint which acknowledges difference(s) of identity, the cultural constructedness of ‘Theory,’ ‘History,’ and ‘Truth,’ and the cultural dynamics of our own labor as academic researchers and teachers” (p. 33). She links a feminist political commitment to transformation with recognition of media misrepresentation and stereotyping. This approach requires unveiling the political and social construction of knowledge, as well as addressing principles of equity and social justice related to representation. Through the inclusion of some groups and exclusion of others, representations benefit dominant and positively represented groups and disadvantage marginalized and subordinate ones.

These biases become especially pernicious when two factors exist:

- limited and dominant groups do the majority of the representing, as in the case of the multinational corporate mass media;
- when the messages are naturalized, people seldom question the transparent social construction of the representations.

Luke argues that it is the teacher’s responsibility within the classroom to make visible the power structure of knowledge and how it benefits some more than others. She insists “that a commitment to social justice and equity principles should guide the media educator’s work in enabling students to come to their own realizations that, say, homophobic, racist or sexist texts or readings, quite simply, oppress and subordinate others” (p. 44).

Further, a student-centered, bottom-up approach is necessary for a standpoint analysis to come from each student’s own culture, knowledge, and experiences. Luke suggests that

collaborative inquiry and media production can be ways for students to voice their discoveries. Poststructuralist, feminist, and critical pedagogies all stress the importance of valuing students' voices for deconstructing media as well as creating their own. While these practical suggestions are congruent with much current advice on media literacy education, Luke asserts the need to take media education beyond just analyzing the production of meaning. She writes that critical media studies must "extend to explorations of how individual and corporate sense-making tie in with larger socio-political issues of culture, gender, class, political economy, nation, and power" (Luke, 1994, p. 31).

Feminist standpoint epistemologies offer a methodology to study up from subordinate positions to reveal structures of oppression, the functioning of hegemony and alternative epistemologies. Uma Narayan states, "[I]t is *easier* and *more likely* for the oppressed to have critical insights into the conditions of their own oppression than it is for those who live outside these structures. Those who actually *live* the oppressions of class, race, or gender have faced the issues that such oppressions generate in a variety of different situations. The insights and emotional responses engendered by these situations are a legacy with which they confront any new issue or situation" (2004, p. 220). Standpoint theories thus offer important concepts for seeing through the naturalization of the dominant perspective. Sandra Harding (2004) suggests we begin our attempt to perceive and understand phenomena from the standpoint of marginalized groups in order to gain multiple perspectives on issues and phenomena that appear as common sense.

## Cultural and Media Studies

While media education has evolved from many disciplines, an important arena of theoretical work for critical media literacy comes from the multidisciplinary field of cultural studies. This is a field of critical inquiry that began decades ago in Europe and continues to grow with new critiques of media and society. From the 1930s through the 1960s, researchers at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research used critical social theory to analyze how media culture and the new tools of communication technology induce ideology and social control. In the 1960s, researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham added to the earlier concerns of ideology with a more sophisticated understanding of the audience as active constructors of reality, not simply mirrors of an external reality. Applying concepts of semiotics, feminism, multiculturalism, and post-modernism, a dialectical understanding of political economy, textual analysis, and audience theory has evolved in which media culture can be analyzed as dynamic discourses that reproduce dominant ideologies as well as entertain, educate, and offer the possibilities for counterhegemonic alternatives (see Kellner, 1995).

In the 1980s, media studies research began to enter the educational arena. With the publication of Len Masterman's *Teaching the Media* (1985), many educators around the world embraced media education less as a specific body of knowledge or set of skills, and more as a framework of *conceptual understandings* (Buckingham, 2003). Different people and organ-

izations across the globe have generated and continue to create different lists of media literacy concepts<sup>6</sup> that vary in number and wording but, for the most part, tend to coincide with a handful of basic principles:

- 1 recognition of the construction of media and communication as a social process as opposed to accepting texts as isolated neutral or transparent conveyors of information;
- 2 some type of semiotic textual analysis that explores the languages, genres, codes, and conventions of the text;
- 3 an exploration of the role audiences play in actively negotiating meanings;
- 4 problematizing the process of representation to uncover and engage issues of ideology, power, and pleasure;
- 5 examination of the production and institutions that motivate and structure the media industries as corporate profit seeking businesses.

Critical media literacy challenges the power of the media to present messages as non-problematic and transparent. Because messages are created by people who make decisions about what to communicate and how to communicate, all messages are influenced by the subjectivity and biases of those creating the message as well as the social contexts within which the process occurs. Along with this encoding subjectivity come the multiple readings of the text as it is decoded by different audiences in different contexts. Media are thus not neutral disseminators of information because the nature of the construction and interpretation processes entails bias and social influence.

Semiotics, the science of signs and how meanings are socially produced from the structural relations in sign systems, has contributed greatly to media literacy. Roland Barthes (1998) explains that semiotics aims to challenge the naturalness of a message, the “what-goes-without-saying” (p. 11). Masterman (1994) asserts that the foundation of media education is the principle of non-transparency. Media do not present reality like transparent windows or simple reflections of the world because media messages are created, shaped, and positioned through a construction process. This construction involves many decisions about what to include or exclude and how to represent reality. Exposing the choices involved in the construction process is an important starting point for critical inquiry because it disrupts the myth that media can be neutral conveyors of information.

From the study of semiotics, media literacy practitioners analyze the existence of dual meanings of signs: denotation and signifier (the more literal reference to content) and connotation and signified (the more associative, subjective significations of a message based on ideological and cultural codes) (Hall, 1980). When connotation and denotation become one and the same, representation appears natural, making the historical and social construction invisible. Therefore, a goal of cultivating media literacy is to help students distinguish between connotation and denotation and signifier and signified (Fiske, 1990). With younger students the terms are simplified into separating what they see or hear from what they think or feel. Creating media can be a powerful vehicle for guiding students to explore these ideas and learn how different codes and conventions function. For example, discus-

sion of the representation of class, gender, and race in media such as television or film requires analysis of the codes and stereotypes through which subordinate groups like workers, women, and people of color are represented, in contrast to representations of bosses and the rich, men, and white people. The analysis of different models of representation of women or people of color makes clear the constructedness of gender and race representations and that dominant negative representations further subordination and make it look natural. Thus, while signifiers that represent male characters like Arnold Schwarzenegger seem to just present a male actor, they construct connotative meanings and signify certain traits such as patriarchal power, violent masculinity, and male dominance. Media texts are thus highly coded constructions with specific rules and practices.

One of the most important components of critical media literacy evolves from work at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the UK and involves the notion of an active audience, challenging previous theories that viewed receivers of media as passive recipients and often victims. Building on semiotic conceptions developed by Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, Stuart Hall (1980) argues, in a study of “Encoding/Decoding,” that a distinction must be made between the encoding of media texts by producers and the decoding by consumers. This distinction highlights the ability of audiences to produce their own readings and meanings, to decode texts in aberrant or oppositional ways, as well as the “preferred” ways in tune with the dominant ideology.

The cultural studies approach provides a major advance for understanding literacy as Ien Ang (2002, p. 180) explains: “Textual meanings do not reside in the texts themselves: a certain text can come to mean different things depending on the interdiscursive context in which viewers interpret it.” The notion that audiences are neither powerless nor omnipotent when it comes to reading media contributes greatly to the potential for media literacy to empower audiences in the process of negotiating meanings. As bell hooks (1996, p. 3) puts it: “While audiences are clearly not passive and are able to pick and choose, it is simultaneously true that there are certain ‘received’ messages that are rarely mediated by the will of the audience.” Empowering the audience through critical thinking inquiry is essential for students to challenge the power of media to create preferred readings. Audience theory views the moment of reception as a contested terrain of cultural struggle where critical thinking skills offer potential for the audience to negotiate different readings and openly struggle with dominant discourses.

The ability for students to see how diverse people can interpret the same message differently is important for multicultural education because understanding differences means more than merely tolerating one another. Research, for example, has shown that the U.S. television series *Dallas* (Katzman et al., & Preece et al., 1978–1991) has very different cultural meanings for people in various countries. Dutch and Israeli audiences, for instance, decode it very differently from American audiences (Ang, 2002). Likewise, different subject positions like gender, race, class, or sexuality will also produce different readings and one’s grasp of a media text is enriched by interpreting from the standpoint of different audience perspectives.

This process of grasping different audience readings and interpretations enhances

democracy as multicultural education for a pluralistic democracy depends on a citizenry that embraces multiple perspectives as a natural consequence of varying experiences, histories, and cultures constructed within structures of dominance and subordination. Feminist Standpoint Epistemologies offer a starting point for this type of inquiry by beginning all analyses from a subordinate position whereby the preferred hegemonic readings are denaturalized and exposed as merely one of many ways to understand the message. Understanding dissimilar ways of seeing is essential to understanding the politics of representation.

Critical media literacy involves the politics of representation in which the form and content of media messages are interrogated in order to question ideology, bias, and the connotations explicit and implicit in the representation. Cultural Studies, Feminist Theory, and Critical Pedagogy offer arsenals of research for this line of inquiry to question media representations of race, class, gender, and so on. Beyond simply locating the bias in media, this concept helps students recognize the ideological and constructed nature of all communication.

For example, reading the content of a TV series like *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (Berman et al., & Whedon et al., 1997–2003) discerns more positive representations of young women than are typical in mainstream media artifacts and sends out messages of teen female empowerment (Kellner, 2004b). The positive representations of gays and lesbians on the show also transmit messages that suggest more multiple and pluralistic representations of sexuality than is usual in U.S. network TV programs (although representations of sexuality have greatly expanded over the past decade). The monsters on *Buffy* can be read as signifying dangers of drugs, rampant sexuality, or gangs producing destructive violence.

Content is often highly symbolic and thus requires a wide range of theoretical approaches to grasp the multidimensional social, political, moral, and sometimes philosophical meanings of a cultural text. Analyzing content also requires questioning the omissions in media representations. Working with students as young as preschool age, Vivian Vasquez (2003) encourages them to ask the following questions: “Whose voice is heard? Who is silenced? Whose reality is presented? Whose reality is ignored? Who is advantaged? Who is disadvantaged?” (p. 15).

In terms of critically engaging the forms of media culture, semiotic analyses can be connected with genre criticism (the study of conventions governing established types of cultural forms, such as soap operas) to reveal how the codes and forms of particular genres follow certain meanings. Situation comedies, for instance, classically follow a conflict/resolution model that demonstrates how to solve certain social problems by correct actions and values, and thus provide morality tales of proper and improper behavior. Soap operas, by contrast, proliferate problems and provide messages concerning the endurance and suffering needed to get through life’s endless miseries, while generating positive and negative models of social behavior. Advertising in turn shows how commodity solutions solve problems of popularity, acceptance, success, and the like. In a high school media literacy class, students retold the same story in different media genres as a method of exposing how different genres position audiences for different readings (Hobbs, 2007).

Other formal techniques also contribute to the construction of meaning such as analy-

sis of narrative, editing, the assemblage of scenes and images, and how the technical features of specific media like film contribute to the construction of meaning. A semiotic and genre analysis of the film *Rambo* (Kassar, Vajna, & Kotcheff, 1982) for instance, would show how it follows the conventions of the Hollywood genre of the war film that dramatizes conflicts between the United States and its “enemies” (see Kellner, 1995). A semiotic analysis would describe how the images of the villains are constructed according to the codes of World War II movies and how the resolution of the conflict and happy ending follows the traditional Hollywood classical cinema, which portrays the victory of good over evil. A semiotic analysis would also include the study of the strictly cinematic and formal elements of a film like *Rambo*, dissecting the ways that camera angles present Rambo as a god, or slow-motion images of him gliding through the jungle code him as a force of nature, or images of him on a Russian torture-wrack with a halo of light illuminating his head construct him as Christ on a cross.

Critical media literacy also encourages students to consider the question of *why* the message was sent and *where* it came from. Too often students believe the role of media is simply to entertain or inform, with little knowledge of the economic structure that supports it. Where once there were many media outlets in every city competing for viewers and readers, a few years ago, there were less than ten transnational corporations dominating the global media market. In the most recent revised edition of Ben Bagdikian’s *The New Media Monopoly* (2004), Bagdikian states that there are now just five corporations that dominate the U.S. media market. He writes:

Five global-dimension firms, operating with many of the characteristics of a cartel, own most of the newspapers, magazines, book publishers, motion picture studios, and radio and television stations in the United States . . . These five conglomerates are Time Warner, by 2003 the largest media firm in the world; The Walt Disney Company; Murdoch’s News Corporation, based in Australia; Viacom; and Bertelsmann, based in Germany. (p. 3)

The consolidation of ownership of the mass media has given control of the public airwaves to a few multinational oligopolies to determine who and what is represented and how. This concentration of ownership threatens the independence and diversity of information and creates the possibility for the global colonization of culture and knowledge (McChesney, 1999a, 2004). Robert McChesney (1999b) insists that the consolidated ownership of the media giants is highly undemocratic, fundamentally noncompetitive, and “more closely resembles a cartel than it does the competitive marketplace found in economics textbooks” (p. 13).

For example, mainstream media in the United States tended to present Republican candidates and presidents like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush favorably because, in part, the conservative Republican agenda was in line with the corporate interests of media companies that favored deregulation, absence of impediments to corporate mergers, and tax breaks for their wealthy employees and advertisers (Kellner, 1990 and 2001). Certain media corporations, like Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation and Fox television network, pursue aggressively right-wing agendas in line with the corporate interests of its owner, board of directors, and top executives who closely follow Murdoch’s conservative line. Thus, know-

ing what sort of corporation produces a media artifact, or what sort of system of production dominates given media, will help to critically interpret biases and distortions in media texts.

## **Transformative Pedagogy and Multiculturalism**

Our multiperspectival approach to critical media literacy is most relevant to progressive and transformative education when taught through a democratic approach with critical pedagogy that follows the ideas of progressive educators like John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Dewey championed education for democracy and placed emphasis on active learning, experimentation, and problem solving. Dewey's pragmatic approach connects theory with practice and requires students to similarly connect reflection with action (1916/1997). Using a problem-posing pedagogy, Freire (1970) calls for critical consciousness that involves perception of concrete situations and problems, as well as action against oppression. The problem-posing alternative that Freire exercises requires dialogical communication between students and teachers where both are learning and teaching each other. This method necessitates praxis, critical reflection, together with action to transform society. For this reason, media education should ideally involve both critical analysis and alternative student media production.

Developing critical media literacy involves perceiving how media like film or video can be used positively as well to teach a wide range of topics, like multicultural understanding and education. If, for example, multicultural education is to champion genuine diversity and expand the curriculum, it is important both for groups marginalized from mainstream education to learn about their own heritage and for dominant groups to explore the experiences and voices of minority and oppressed people. When groups often underrepresented or misrepresented in the media become investigators of their representations and creators of their own meanings, the learning process becomes an empowering expression of voice and democratic transformation.

Thus, critical media literacy can promote multicultural literacy, conceived as understanding and engaging the heterogeneity of cultures and subcultures that constitute an increasingly global and multicultural world (Cortés, 2000; Courts, 1998; Weil, 1998). Critical media literacy not only teaches students to learn from media, to resist media manipulation, and to use media materials in constructive ways, but it is also concerned with developing skills that will help create good citizens and that will make individuals more motivated and competent participants in social life.

In the evolving multimedia environment, media literacy is arguably more important than ever. Cultural and media studies have begun to teach us to recognize the ubiquity of media culture in contemporary society, the growing trends toward multicultural education, and the need for media literacy that addresses the issue of multicultural and social difference.<sup>7</sup> There is expanding recognition that media representations help construct our images and understanding of the world and that education must meet the dual challenges of teaching media literacy in a multicultural society and sensitizing students and the pub-

lic at large to the inequities and injustices of a society based on gender, race, and class inequalities and discrimination. Recent critical studies see the role of mainstream media in exacerbating or diminishing these inequalities and how media education and the production of alternative media can help create a healthy multiculturalism of diversity and a more robust democracy. They confront some of the most serious difficulties and problems that currently face us as educators and citizens.

## Radical Democracy

Critical media literacy in our conception is tied to the project of radical democracy and concerned to develop skills that will enhance democratization and civic participation. It takes a comprehensive approach that teaches critical skills and how to use media as instruments of social communication and change. The technologies of communication are becoming more and more accessible to young people and ordinary citizens and can be used to promote education, democratic self-expression, and social progress. Technologies that could help produce the end of participatory democracy, by transforming politics into media spectacles and the battle of images, and by turning spectators into passive consumers, could also be used to help invigorate democratic debate and participation.

Indeed, teaching critical media literacy should be a participatory, collaborative project. Watching television shows or films together could promote productive discussions between teachers and students (or parents and children), with an emphasis on eliciting student views, producing a variety of interpretations of media texts, and teaching basic principles of hermeneutics and criticism. Students and youths are often more media savvy, knowledgeable, and immersed in media culture than their teachers, and can contribute to the educational process through sharing their ideas, perceptions, and insights. Along with critical discussion, debate, and analysis, teachers ought to be guiding students in an inquiry process that deepens their critical exploration of issues that affect them and society. Because media culture is often part and parcel of students' identity and a most powerful cultural experience, teachers must be sensitive in criticizing artifacts and perceptions that students hold dear, yet an atmosphere of critical respect for difference and inquiry into the nature and effects of media culture should be promoted (Luke, 1997).

A major challenge in developing critical media literacy, however, results from the fact that it is not a pedagogy in the traditional sense with firmly established principles, a canon of texts, and tried-and-true teaching procedures. It requires a democratic pedagogy that involves teachers sharing power with students as they join together in the process of unveiling myths and challenging hegemony. Moreover, the material of media culture is so polymorphous, multivalent, and polysemic, that it necessitates sensitivity to different readings, interpretations, perceptions of the complex images, scenes, narratives, meanings, and messages of media culture, which in its own ways is as complex and challenging to critically decipher as book culture.

Teaching critical media literacy involves occupation of a site above the dichotomy of fandom and censor. One can teach how media culture provides significant statements or insights about the social world, empowering visions of gender, race, and class, or complex

aesthetic structures and practices, thereby putting a positive spin on how it can provide significant contributions to education. Nevertheless, we ought to indicate also how media culture can advance sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice, as well as misinformation, problematic ideologies, and questionable values, accordingly promoting a dialectical approach to the media.

## Conclusion

Critical media literacy gives individuals power over their culture and thus enables people to create their own meanings and identities to shape and transform the material and social conditions of their culture and society. Many critical educators have been promoting these goals, including Masterman (1994) who proposes that media education aim for critical autonomy, empowering students to be independently critical. Robert Ferguson (2001) suggests that our relationships with media are not autonomous; rather, they depend on taking positions related to social contexts. Because we are always taking sides, Ferguson calls for critical solidarity, which he describes as “a means by which we acknowledge the social dimensions of our thinking and analysis. It is also a means through which we may develop our skills of analysis and relative autonomy” (p. 42). Critical solidarity means teaching students to interpret information and communication within humanistic, social, historical, political, and economic contexts for them to understand the interrelationships and consequences of their actions and lifestyles. If we combine critical autonomy with critical solidarity, we can teach students to be independent and interdependent critical thinkers, who will be less dependent on media framing and representations. Critical media literacy offers an excellent framework to teach critical solidarity and the skills that can challenge the social construction of information and communication, from hypertext to video games.

The absence of critical analysis and production in most schools, along with the last decades of unprecedented technological innovations and globalization, make critical media literacy so vital and timely. The current fascination with technology and interest in computer literacy has been receiving significant public support yet lacks a critical-analytical framework to analyze these new tools. The focus on acquiring technological skills, as if technology were neutral, has left a major pedagogical void that presents an excellent opportunity for critical media literacy. Carmen Luke (2004) suggests that if media literacy can be brought into schools through “the ‘backdoor’ into computer literacy education,” then it may have a better chance of being accepted and greatly improving computer education. We agree with this position and would propose that critical media literacy be applied to new information and computer technologies, as well as more (now) traditional broadcast media.

We believe twenty-first century schools must change the way they teach by empowering students to analyze and use media and technology to express their views and visions in critical solidarity with the world around them. Literacy instruction needs to change, and this movement must come from both the top down and the bottom up. This is a big project and to be successful, it requires that teachers, administrators, and policy makers work

together. Literacy must be reframed to expand the definition of a text to include new modes of communication and to enhance our critical analytical processes to explore audience reception, ideology, social justice, and oppression, as well as the political, economic, historical, and social contexts within which all messages are written and read.

Cultural studies and a radically democratic transformative pedagogy offer the theoretical and pedagogical background to inform practice that can democratically reconstruct education and society. To move forward with critical media literacy we need to lobby for better funding for education, especially where it is needed most—in the inner cities and other oppressed areas. We need to challenge the false wisdom of high stakes testing and deficit thinking, as well as to train teachers in critical pedagogy and empower them to use their creativity more than scripted curricula. In addition, we need conferences, teacher education, and continuing professional development that teach cultural studies, critical pedagogy, and practical applications for how to engage students in the classroom with critical media literacy concepts.

We recommend that media education programs be instituted throughout K-12 and that linking media literacy with production become a regular practice. Standards for media literacy programs should include criticizing how media reproduce racism, sexism, homophobia, and other prejudices and encouraging students to find their own voices in criticizing media culture and producing alternative media. Media education should be linked with education for democracy, where students are encouraged to become informed and media literate participants in their societies. Critical media literacy should thus be linked with information literacy, technological literacy, the arts, and the social sciences, and the democratic reconstruction of education. Critical media literacy should be a common thread that runs through all curricular areas because it deals with communication and society.

The basis of media literacy is that all messages are constructed, and when education begins with this understanding of the social construction of knowledge, the literacy process can expand critical inquiry into multiple forms of information and communication, including television and other modes of media culture, the Internet, advertising, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and, of course, books. Literacy is thus a necessary condition to equip people to participate in the local, national, and global economy, culture, and polity. As Dewey (1916/1997) argued, education is necessary to enable people to participate in democracy, for without an educated, informed, and literate citizenry, strong democracy is impossible. Moreover, there are crucial links between literacy, democracy, empowerment, and social participation in politics and everyday life. Hence, without developing adequate literacies, differences between “haves” and “have nots” cannot be overcome, and individuals and groups will be left out of the emerging global economy, networked society, and culture.

Living in what Marshall McLuhan (1964/1997) coined the global village, it is not enough to merely understand media, students need to be empowered to critically negotiate meanings, engage with the problems of misrepresentations and underrepresentations, and produce their own alternative media. Addressing issues of inequality and injustice in media representations can be a powerful starting place for problem-posing transformative

education. Critical media literacy offers the tools and framework to help students become subjects in the process of deconstructing injustices, expressing their own voices, and struggling to create a better society.

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#### NOTES

- 1 On multiple literacies, see Kellner (1998, 2004).
- 2 On the new forms of Internet culture and online communities, see Kahn & Kellner (2003 and 2005).
- 3 See Kellner & Share, 2005. In 2006, the two national US media literacy organizations boasted memberships of about 500 people each.
- 4 This is part of The Alliance for a Media Literate America definition available online at: <http://www.aamlainfo.org/medialit/index.php>
- 5 Hammer's course website can be viewed at: <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/05F/women/cm178-1/>
- 6 Canada's Ontario Ministry of Education's Eight Key Concepts, British Film Institute's Signpost Questions, The Center for Media Literacy's Five Core Concepts, and so on. See the latter's website at: [http://www.medialit.org/bp\\_mlk.html](http://www.medialit.org/bp_mlk.html)
- 7 For examples of analyses of media literacy and pedagogy, see Cortés (2000), Fleming (1993), Giroux (1992, 1993, 1994, 1996), Giroux and McLaren (1994), Giroux & Shannon (1997), Goodman (2003), Kellner (1995a, 1995b), Kellner & Ryan (1988), Luke (1994, 1997), Masterman (1985/2001), McLaren, Hammer, Sholle, and Reilly (1995), Potter (2001), Semali and Watts Pailliotet (1999), Schwoch, White & Reilly (1992), Sholle and Densky (1994). See also the work of Barry Duncan and the Canadian Association for Media Literacy (website: <http://www.nald.ca/province/que/litcent/media.htm>) and the Los Angeles based Center for Media Literacy ([www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org)). It is a scandal that there are not more efforts to promote media literacy throughout the school system from K-12 and into the university. Perhaps the ubiquity of computer and multimedia culture will awaken educators and citizens to the importance of developing media literacy to create individuals empowered to intelligently access, read, interpret, and criticize contemporary media and cyberculture.

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