

KEY FACTS

Fall 2003

Media Literacy

As American culture becomes increasingly permeated with media messages and images, many advocates and educators have moved toward media literacy as a way to educate young people about the role media play in their lives. There is a wide diversity of perspectives and approaches in the emerging media literacy movement. Some proponents contend that media literacy is a viable way to mitigate the potential adverse effects of media and enhance its benefits. Others argue that media literacy education should help youth become critical media consumers as well as empower them as citizens to make informed choices and actively participate in society.

Defining Media Literacy

According to the definition established by the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, *media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce communication in a variety of forms.*¹ In essence, a media literate person can think critically about what they see, hear and read in books, newspapers, magazines, television, radio, movies, music, advertising, video games, the Internet, and new emerging technology. For many proponents, it also includes learning how to create messages using print, audio, video, and multimedia.

Advocates of media literacy emphasize five basic principles for critical analysis of media messages:²

- *Media messages are constructed.*
- *Messages are representations of reality with embedded values and points of view.*
- *Each form of media uses a unique set of rules to construct messages.*
- *Individuals interpret media messages and create their own meaning based on personal experience.*
- *Media are driven by profit within economic and political contexts.*

Media Literacy Education

While there is no national policy on media education in the United States,³ several policymakers endorse media literacy programs as a way to educate and

enlighten children about media.⁴ Within the nation's educational system, media literacy standards and curricula have been developed by individual states, districts, schools or teachers, as well as professional organizations.⁵

K-12 Schools

- According to a recent study, all 50 states now have at least one element of media literacy as part of the educational framework. Most incorporate media literacy as a component in major subject areas such as English, language and communication arts, social studies, civics or health.⁶
- A preliminary e-survey of U.S. colleges and universities revealed that training in media literacy is in the formative stage of development in teacher education programs.⁷ Educational opportunities are largely limited to continuing education courses, in-service workshops, professional conferences, seminars and institutes.⁸
- The media literacy movement has spawned two national organizations in the United States that advance media education training, networking, and information exchange through professional conferences and media list-serves: Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA) and Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME).¹¹
- Some free speech advocates support media literacy education as a preferable alternative to efforts to restrict access to ideas and information that may be potentially harmful to children.⁹
- There are critics of media literacy education who debate the merits of teaching about popular culture because they claim it weakens the quality of instruction and undermines teacher authority. Some also object to any additions to the already overburdened curriculum, question the protectionist approach as an educational objective, equate media literacy with media-bashing, or oppose it for other reasons.¹⁰

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Beyond the Classroom

- Media literacy education is not limited to formal classroom instruction. A variety of extra-curricular programs teach media literacy skills as part of after-school activities, summer camps, community organizations, and faith-based groups, and several organizations actively support youth media makers.¹²

Family Media Literacy

- Since home is where children spend most of their time using media, some proponents of media literacy have focused on helping parents develop their children's media literacy skills through active mediation,¹³ including making a family media plan, using media together, and discussing media content with children.¹⁴
- The National PTA is an advocate for children's media issues and developed the *Taking Charge of Your TV* project in partnership with Cable in the Classroom and the National Cable and Telecommunications Association. The project trains cable and PTA leaders in key elements of media literacy to present workshops for parents, caregivers, educators, and community groups.¹⁵ Other media organizations and independent consultants offer similar training and workshops.¹⁶
- The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) advises pediatricians to talk to parents and their children during office visits about media exposure to determine how family media habits contribute to a child's psychosocial and physical well-being. The AAP *Media Matters Campaign* also provides media education resources for parents and recommends guidelines for healthy development.¹⁷

Media Literacy Resources for Educators and Parents

Action Coalition for Media Education
<http://www.acmecoalition.org>

Alliance for a Media Literate America
<http://www.amlainfo.org>

Cable in the Classroom
<http://www.ciconline.com>

Center for Media Literacy
<http://www.medialit.org>

Media Literacy Clearinghouse
<http://www.med.sc.edu/medialit>

Media Literacy Online Project
<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/mlr/home/>

National Telemedia Council
<http://www.nationaltelemediacouncil.org>

Project Look Sharp
<http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp>

Effectiveness of Media Literacy

Media literacy increasingly is being integrated into educational programs for school children, college students, parents, educators, and health practitioners. Although the efficacy of these programs usually is not explicitly measured, an emerging body of research is examining media literacy as a health promotion strategy and as a tool for developing critical thinking and literacy skills. The following summarizes some of the key findings of recent research studies conducted in the United States.

Media Violence, Aggression and Anti-social Behavior

- Several studies have indicated that media literacy lessons incorporated into standard curriculum can help reduce potentially harmful effects of TV violence on young viewers. In one study, 3rd and 4th-graders given a course in media literacy decreased their time spent watching TV and playing video games and reduced their use of verbal and physical aggression as judged by their peers.¹⁸ Another study of a year-long critical viewing curriculum found that children in the early grades watched less violent TV and identified less with aggressive characters after the intervention.¹⁹
- Other studies have concluded that media literacy interventions can help high-risk youth develop more responsible decision-making skills in their own lives. According to an evaluation of *Flashpoint*, implemented by the Massachusetts Juvenile Justice System, learning to deconstruct media messages helped juvenile offenders think critically about the consequences of risky behaviors and develop strategies to resist impulses that may lead them to engage in these behaviors, particularly during stressful moments or "flashpoints" in their lives.²⁰ Another evaluation of a program instituted in the New York State Office of Children and Family had similar findings and found there were benefits of involving high-risk youth at an early age in media literacy training.²¹

Body Image, Nutrition and Fitness

- An evaluation of *GO GIRLS!*, a media education program created by the National Eating Disorders Association, found that media literacy skills can help high school girls enhance their sense of self-acceptance and empowerment regarding media images of women's bodies.²² Other studies have found that even brief peer-guided workshops can be effective in counteracting messages that perpetuate unrealistic body images and promote unhealthy eating.²³

- A study of the effectiveness of *ATLAS*, a team-centered media literacy intervention for high school male athletes, found that the program helped develop skepticism about steroids and supplements while building knowledge about strength-training. After one year, male teen athletes reported less intention to use steroids and a reduction in their use of illicit drugs such as marijuana, amphetamines, and narcotics. Other long-term health effects included less supplement use, improved nutrition behaviors, and fewer reports of drinking and driving.²⁴

Analyzing Media Messages

Media literacy educators suggest key questions to consider about media content:²⁵

- Who created this message and why are they sending it? Who owns and profits from it?
- What techniques are used to attract and hold attention?
- What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in this message?
- What is omitted from this message? Why was it left out?
- How might different people interpret this message?

Alcohol, Tobacco and Drugs

- An evaluation of a classroom-based intervention found that media literacy education increased children's understanding of the persuasive intent of alcohol ads and influenced their decision-making about drinking alcohol. Participants were less likely to expect positive consequences from drinking, choose alcohol-related products, and desire to be like characters that drank.²⁶
- An evaluation of a comprehensive curriculum for high school students, developed and taught by teen leaders under the guidance of adult coaches, indicated that media literacy education influenced tobacco use at different stages of the decision-making process. Teens who had never tried tobacco became more aware of the persuasive tactics of tobacco advertising and developed skills to resist it and dissuade peers from smoking. Teens who had tried tobacco increased their awareness of how tobacco messages affect themselves and other teens, were less likely to identify with people in ads who smoke, and felt that they were less susceptible to peer pressure to smoke.²⁷ Other studies suggest that even a single media literacy intervention can help children and adolescents understand the persuasive appeals of tobacco advertising messages and make a difference in their intention to use tobacco, at least in the short-term.²⁸

- Government agencies such as The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP), and Centers for Disease Control (CDC) endorse media literacy as a component of youth drug prevention strategies and have sponsored curricula that have been widely implemented but not formally evaluated.²⁹ Teacher evaluations of one of them, *Media Literacy for Drug Prevention*, indicated that the curriculum achieved certain objectives: instilled the belief that most young people do not do drugs; enhanced the perception that using drugs can lead to negative consequences and that a drug-free lifestyle is more likely to lead to positive consequences; increased personal and social skills that promote positive lifestyle choices, including resistance to drug use; reinforced positive uses of time as behavioral alternatives to drug use; and improved academic skills.³⁰

Critical Thinking and Literacy Skills

- The first large scale empirical study measuring the acquisition of media literacy skills in the United States concluded that incorporating media message analysis into secondary level English language arts curriculum can enhance the development of literacy skills. When 11th-grade students who received year-long media literacy instruction as part of their English course were compared to a control group enrolled in the same level course without the media literacy component, the media literate students outperformed the other students on the same assessment. Media literacy instruction improved students' reading, viewing and listening comprehension of print, audio and video texts, message analysis and interpretation, and writing skills.³¹ The media literacy lessons were designed and integrated into existing curriculum by the classroom English teachers, an approach previous research suggests may be a more successful technique than using off-the-shelf curriculum.³²

Endnotes:

¹ Patricia Aufderheide, *National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy*, Conference Report (Washington, DC: Aspen Institute, 1993).

² Although the exact wording may vary, the basic media literacy core concepts are similarly defined and applied by media educators. See, for example, Elizabeth Thoman, "Skills and Strategies for Media Education," Center for Media Literacy, <http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/pdf/CMLskillsandstrat.pdf> (23 July 2003).

³ Kathleen Tyner, *Literacy in a Digital World* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998). The United States lags behind other countries such as Canada, England, and Australia which have a centralized education ministry that disseminates media education resources and training.

⁴ See, for example, Senator Joseph Lieberman, Prepared Statement, Media Research Forum, April 9, 2003, <<http://www.senate.gov/~lieberman/press/03/04/2003409855.html>> (30 September 2003); Richard Riley, U.S. Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education, "Media Literacy for America's Young People," December 13, 1995, <<http://interact.uoregon.edu/Medialit/mlr/readings/articles/Riley.html>> (30 September 2003).

- ⁵ See, for example, The National Communication Association, *The Speaking, Listening and Media Literacy Standards and Competency Statements for K-12 Education*, <<http://www.natcom.org/Instruction/K-12/standards.pdf>> (31 July 2003).
- ⁶ Robert Kubey and Frank Baker, "Has Media Literacy Found a Curricular Foothold?" *Education Week* (October 27, 1999), <<http://www.med.sc.edu:1081/edweek.htm>> (31 July 2003). A state-by-state listing is available at <<http://www.med.sc.edu:81/medialit/statelit.htm>> (31 July 2003).
- ⁷ The survey indicated that media literacy is offered more in the field of communication than in education. Art Silverblatt et al., "Media Literacy in U.S. Institutions of Higher Education," July 25, 2002 (updated May 18, 2003), <http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/survey/survey_Report.htm> (20 June 2003).
- ⁸ James Brown, "Media Literacy and Critical Television Viewing in Education," *Handbook of Children and the Media*, eds. D. Singer and J. Singer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 681-698.
- ⁹ Marjorie Heins and Christina Cho, *Media Literacy: An Alternative to Censorship*, <<http://www.fepproject.org/policyreports/medialiteracyfull.html>> (31 July 2003).
- ¹⁰ For a discussion of the status of media literacy education in the United States, see the symposium issue of *Journal of Communication* (Winter 1998); in particular, Renee Hobbs, "The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement" (pp. 16-32), and Robert Kubey, "Obstacles to the Development of Media Education in the United States" (pp. 58-69).
- ¹¹ AMLA <<http://www.amlainfo.org>>; ACME <<http://www.acmecolition.org>>
- ¹² For example, Listen Up! Youth Media Network helps connect youth media makers <<http://www.pbs.org/merrow/listenup>> and National Alliance of Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC) supports independent media and advocates for media literacy education <<http://www.namac.org>>. NAMAC is currently documenting the sustainability of youth media programs in the U.S. See, Kathleen Tyner, "Mapping the Field: Knowledge Network Focuses on Youth Media," <<http://www.namac.org>> (10 September 2003).
- ¹³ Cable in the Classroom, *Thinking Critically about Media: Schools and Families in Partnership* (Alexandria, VA: Cable in the Classroom, 2002), <<http://www.ciconline.com/Enrichment/MediaLiteracy/ThinkingCritically/default.htm>> (31 July 2003).
- ¹⁴ See, for example, Marjorie Hogan, "Parents and Other Adults: Models and Monitors of Healthy Media Habits," *Handbook of Children and the Media*, eds. D. Singer and J. Singer (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 663-679; Victor Strasburger and Barbara Wilson, "Ten Arguments in Favor of Solutions," *Children, Adolescents & the Media* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 368-421.
- ¹⁵ National PTA, Cable in the Classroom, National Cable & Telecommunications Association, *Taking Charge of Your TV: A Guide to Critical Viewing for Parents and Children*, <<http://www.ciconline.com/Enrichment/MediaLiteracy/TakingCharge/default.htm>> (31 July 2003).
- ¹⁶ For example, Center for Media Literacy <<http://www.medialit.org>>, New Mexico Media Literacy Project (NMMLP) <<http://www.nmmlp.org>>, and National Institute on Media and the Family (NIMF) <<http://www.mediafamily.org>> offer training, workshops, and resources.
- ¹⁷ In 1997, the AAP instituted the *Media Matters Campaign* to educate its members and provide clinical tools to assess and mitigate media effects on children and adolescents. See American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Public Education, "Media Education," *Pediatrics* 104 (August 1999):341-343; *Understanding the Impact of Media on Children and Teens*, <<http://www.aap.org/family/mediainpact.htm>>; *Media Education in the Practice Setting: An Overview of Media and the Pediatrician's Role*, <<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/mmguide.pdf>> (31 July 2003).
- ¹⁸ Thomas Robinson et al., "Effects of Reducing Children's Television and Video Game Use on Aggressive Behavior," *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine* 155(2001):17-23.
- ¹⁹ Lawrence Rosenkoetter et al., "Mitigating the Harmful Effects of Violent Television," Unpublished report, Oregon State University (August 2002).
- ²⁰ Jane Moore, Neal DeChillo, Barbara Nicholson, Angela Genovese, and Stephanie Sladen, "Flashpoint: An Innovative Media Literacy Intervention for High-Risk Adolescents," *Juvenile and Family Court Journal* (Spring 2000):23-33; Ruth Budelmann, "Substance and Flash: Media Literacy Meets Juvenile Justice," *Telemidium: The Journal of Media Literacy* 48(Fall 2002):41-42. The National Crime Prevention Council and the Bureau of Justice Assistance selected this program as one of the country's most innovative and effective prevention programs for high-risk youth.
- ²¹ Joe Behson, "Media Literacy for High-Risk Children and Youth," *Telemidium: The Journal of Media Literacy* 48(Fall 2002):38-40.
- ²² Nirva Piran, Michael Levine, and Lori Irving, "GO GIRLS! Media Literacy, Activism, and Advocacy Project," *Healthy Weight Journal* (November/December 2000):89-90. Similar programs such as *Free to be Me* developed for the Girl Scouts and *Full of Ourselves* developed by Harvard Eating Disorders Center also use media literacy as a prevention strategy for disordered eating. See, Dianne Neumark-Sztainer et al., "Primary Prevention of Disordered Eating among Preadolescent Girls: Feasibility and Short-term Effect of a Community-based Intervention," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* (December 2000), <http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m0822/12_100/68739951/p1/article.jhtml?term=neumark-sztainer+%22primary+prevention+of+disordered+eating+among+preadolescent+girls%22> (31 July 2003); Sally Anne Giedrys, "Creating a Curriculum to Help Girls Battle Eating Disorders," *Harvard Gazette Archive* (February 11, 1999), <<http://www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/1999/02.11/eating.html>> (6 August 2003).
- ²³ Lori Irving, Julie DuPen, and Susan Berel, "A Media Literacy Program for High School Females," *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention* 6(1998):119-131; Lori Irving and Susan Berel, "Comparison of Media-Literacy Programs to Strengthen College Women's Resistance to Media Images," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 25(2001):103-111.
- ²⁴ Linn Goldberg, David MacKinnon, Diane Elliot, Esther Moe, Greg Clarke, and JeeWon Cheong, "The Adolescents Training and Learning to Avoid Steroids Program," *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* 54(April 2000):332-338.
- ²⁵ A basic media literacy skill is learning to question media messages. This version is based on Center for Media Literacy, <http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/pdf/CMLskillsandstrat.pdf>.
- ²⁶ Erica Austin and Kristine Johnson, "Effects of General and Alcohol-Specific Media Literacy Training on Children's Decision Making about Alcohol," *Journal of Health Communication* 2(1997):17-42.
- ²⁷ Bruce Pinkleton, Erica Austin, Marilyn Cohen, and Autumn Miller, "Media Literacy and Smoking Prevention Among Adolescents: A Year-Two Evaluation of the American Legacy Foundation/Washington State Department of Health Anti-Tobacco Campaign," Paper presented at the International Communication Association, Health Communication Division, San Diego, California, May 2003.
- ²⁸ Richard Beltrami and Patrick Bridge, "Relationship between Tobacco Advertising and Youth Smoking: Assessing the Effectiveness of a School-based, Antismoking Intervention Program," *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 35(Winter 2001):263-27; Bob McCannon, "Media Literacy: What? Why? How?" *Children, Adolescents & the Media*, eds. Victor Strasburger and Barbara Wilson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 322-367.
- ²⁹ *Media Literacy for Drug Prevention* was developed by The New York Times Newspaper in Education Fund and sponsored by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy. *MediaSharp: Analyzing Tobacco and Alcohol Messages* was published by The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; The Office on Smoking and Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; American Academy of Pediatrics; and National Education Association Health Information Network.
- ³⁰ The New York Times Newspaper in Education Program, *Media Literacy for Drug Prevention Teacher Survey Report* (August 2002).
- ³¹ Renee Hobbs and Richard Frost, "Measuring the Acquisition of Media Literacy Skills," *Reading Research Quarterly* (Spring 2003), <<http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/departments/media/curriculum/COW/hobbs-and-frost%20.pdf>> (31 July 2003).
- ³² Renee Hobbs and Richard Frost, "Instructional Practices in Media Literacy and Their Impact on Students' Learning," *New Jersey Journal of Communication* 6(1999):123-148, <<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/mlr/readings/articles/hobbs/instpractice.html>> (31 July 2003).

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