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What is Media Literacy?

Media literacy is a set of competencies that enable us to interpret media texts and institutions, to make media of our own, and to recognize and engage with the social and political influence of media in everyday life. That is the shortest definition we can provide. The rest of this book is about expanding this definition and situating media literacy within evolving discussions of literacy, media, and technology education.

Media literacy suggests a capacity or competence to do something with media, whether to make sense of it, to produce it, or to understand its role in our societies. Just as more traditional literacy practices enable one to engage with print-based texts, media literacy enables one to engage with a variety of multimodal texts ('texts' that may include visual, audio, and print text elements) that range from a magazine advertisement to a televised rock video, a radio talk show to a video game, a cell phone photograph to a website. In reality, the range of possible multimodal texts that can be studied or produced through the critical lens of media literacy is vast. That said, it is important to note at the outset that media includes both media texts (i.e., a newspaper, a song, a film, or a website) produced by broadcasters, film-makers, and Web designers, and media technologies (i.e., television, film, and digital technologies such as cell phones, iPods, and digital cameras) used to produce these texts.

We recognize that framing the meaning of media in this manner runs the risk of escalating the subject to the point where the center does not hold. But media literacy has long faced the problem of developing a mode of analysis or a way of thinking that speaks across the various technologies, texts, and institutions that make up contemporary media cultures. We are equally

aware that we are writing from a privileged vantage point in the history of media, and of media education. Cresting the wave of some powerful new transformations in communication, we are in a position to see patterns that were not as clear even a decade ago, and to view a world powerfully transformed from the one of 20 years ago. In 1990, the personal computer was still a somewhat clunky machine owned mainly by technology buffs and educators. E-mail was primarily an inter-university messaging system and the World Wide Web was a modest, text-driven system. Meanwhile, television was at its apogee, enjoying its last moments as the culturally central communications medium it had become. Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985) and Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) were influential texts that suggested an era of immanent intellectual decline. Said Bloom (1987): 'Our students have lost the practice of and taste for reading' (p. 62). 'As long as they have the Walkman on,' he continued, 'they cannot hear what the great tradition has to say. And, after its prolonged use, when they take it off, they find they are deaf' (p. 81).

As if art should imitate life imitating art, *The Simpsons* had aired its first episode in December of 1989, and the dumbing down of America seemed in full flower in a revolution symbolized by Homer and Bart Simpson. (In a sidebar in Chapter 4 we demonstrate that *The Simpsons* is not dumb at all where media education is concerned.) The Walkman referenced by Bloom had been in circulation for just over ten years, and MTV, a station where commercials are content and all content is commercial, had been broadcasting for almost a decade. The world of media in 1990 was thus one of consumption by mass audiences, and the trends appeared to be moving towards greater individualization (Walkman), more base content (*The Simpsons*), and greater commercialization (MTV).

If this was true in America, the forces of globalization and the increasing movement of media texts and technologies around the world during this period meant that similar debates and circumstances were underway across the world's regions (Tufte and Enghel, 2009). Throughout this book, we mark some of these developments. Here we note, however, that the late 1980s and 1990s corresponded with a time of dramatic growth of media literacy organizations worldwide, the apogee of an era we will call 'Media Literacy 1.0.'

We use this designation because this period of history was a stage of growth in media education that focused primarily on the power and influence of broadcast media (i.e., the production of film and television

studios, record labels, and corporate advertising). Given the circumstances of the era, media education was mainly predicated on reacting to the monolith of the mass media, and the primary method used in media literacy was a critique of *representation* focused on what was being communicated (the 'texts'), by whom (the media 'industry'), and for whom (the 'audience'). We argue in Chapter 4 that there is still much that remains helpful about Media Literacy 1.0 – after all, most web trolling, music listening, television watching, and film going among children and youth is still intertwined with the world of corporate media. If this is true today, however, by 1990 there was already a robust media education sector emerging in many nations in response to the role of the mass media in kids' lives. The UNESCO Grunwald Declaration on Media Education of 1982 had to a great extent set the tone for these developments. Indeed, the UNESCO statement represented an important consensus among the 19 nations assembled at Grunwald, Germany.

> Rather than condemn or endorse the undoubted power of the media, we need to accept their significant impact and penetration throughout the world as an established fact, and also appreciate their importance as an element of culture in today's world [...] The school and the family share the responsibility of preparing the young person for living in a world of powerful images, words and sounds. Children and adults need to be literate in all three of these symbolic systems, and this will require some reassessment of educational priorities. Such a reassessment might well result in an integrated approach to the teaching of language and communication. [Nonetheless,] media education will be most effective when parents, teachers, media personnel and decision-makers all acknowledge they have a role to play in developing greater critical awareness among listeners, viewers and readers.

Shortly after the Grunwald Declaration a new model for articulating a media literacy curriculum emerged from the influential work of Len Masterman. Masterman's seminal text, *Teaching the Media* (1985), would in fact form the basis of much Media Literacy 1.0 work. At root, Masterman argued that students need to engage with issues of media production, language, representation, and audiences to address how meaning operates in the broadcast media. The formula drawn from Masterman and elaborated by media educators across a variety of contexts enabled a rich, critical, and savvy analysis of media institutions, texts, and media reception contexts. This method, still a key component of media education

today, responded to the cultural and social conditions of the day, an era of massified and one-way media flow.

Media Literacy 2.000

By 2000, however, the world of communications media was in a period of rapid evolution. The previous decade had seen the entry of a variety of new technologies and applications into the marketplace and a thoroughgoing transformation of others that had still been in primitive forms a decade before. The synthetic World Wide Web of Tim Berners-Lee had made its debut in the early 1990s and had been the biggest transformation in communications media of that decade, enabling the mass adaptation of other Internet applications such as e-mail, instant messaging, and chat, as well as providing an electronic portal to a virtual Library of Alexandria of knowledge, data, information, and nonsense. The staggering growth of the role of the Internet in everyday life and commerce was such that world governments had spent months of preparation for the turning of the clock in 2000, fearing a Millennium bug that was supposed to cause mass chaos. While this turned out to be one of the greatest unauthored hoaxes in communications history, another perfect storm brewing in media education circles in 2000 came from a different technology that had made great advances in the previous decade.

Video games were not new in 2000, but their complexity and popularity seemed to reach new heights. Complicating this, in the previous year, two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado had come to school with guns and bombs and proceeded to kill as many students as they could. When the rampage was over, 15 people were dead, including a teacher and the two shooters. In seeking answers to this senseless tragedy, pundits and theorists had identified the shooters' interest in violent video games as a potential cause of the incident. We track the debates on media violence and the specific place of video games in these debates in Chapter 3; suffice it to say, however, this interactive media technology came in to media education debates under a hail of suspicion. In truth, for the most part, media literacy did not have a place for video gaming, predicated as it was on the much more active participation of game users. Media education had been, and still was, a discourse well situated to respond to broadcast screen media. Here, the important questions seemed to be: what's on the screen, who makes it, and how does the viewer respond to it? Similar orientations

were taken to the pages of magazines and newspapers, and, to a much lesser extent, the audio messaging of radio. But, as discussed at various points throughout this book, different and, in some instances, more complex questions need to be asked of video games. In the early 2000s, however, media education was still predicated primarily on a viewer whose hands were not engaged in making or playing media. It was a discourse that responded primarily to the practices of the eye and the ear.

In the subsequent decade, hands-on interaction and participation in media consumption and production has increasingly become the norm rather than the exception. Henry Jenkins (2006a) describes these practices as part of a culture of convergence. Such a culture is one where there are more opportunities for young people (and others) to express themselves through digital media, 'to transform personal reaction[s]' to the images, sounds, and narratives of consumer media culture into forms of 'social interaction' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 41). In a sense, the contemporary period has involved the most ruptural and transformative shifts in media and communications since the late nineteenth century. This is a period of profound change in how we organize and produce knowledge, and in how we communicate. The most significant element of this change is *participation*, along with two-way media flow. The era of one-way information flow from publishers and broadcasters that Tom Pettit (2007) calls the 'Gutenberg Parenthesis' is over. Of course, we are still in a nascent period, but there have been unmistakable shifts in social and cultural life. The dynamic relationship between Media Literacy 1.0 and Media Literacy 2.0 we argue for in this book is meant to address these shifts. At root, we suggest that the core of media literacy today is the work of empowering young people through meaningful and critical participation in contemporary media environments. We note, as do Jenkins et al. (2006), however, that interactive technologies – including computers, the Internet, and digital cameras – do not guarantee such participation. Rather, the latter must be nurtured, and this is where media educators must play a profound role.

The notion that young people can be empowered through and about media as a means for reshaping public spheres emerged as part of certain media education initiatives as early as the 1960s (see Chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion on this, especially in relation to the development of community-based youth media production initiatives). Nonetheless, until the 2000s, the idea of media education as empowerment had largely been a marginal position, argued most forcefully by educators and scholars such as David Buckingham (1996, 2003a) and Jesus Martin-Barbero (1987). Until

the new communication technology r/evolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s, empowerment models of media education offered students a perspective on media use and appropriation that focused on how viewers and consumers of media were not simply brainwashed, but rather participated in far more complex interpretations and mediations with the media in their lives. Unfortunately, this was always a relatively advanced perspective in media education circles, the more subtle perspective of educators who had read and understood some cultural studies and who were skeptical of approaches that only saw the potential negative impacts of media on young people. Most media education in practice continued to be a form of simple response to the idea that the mainstream media largely perpetuates dominant power relationships and ideas (i.e., hegemony), however, and so David Buckingham was still forcefully making the case in 2003 for an empowerment model in his influential *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture.* For our purposes, the lessons to be learned from this transitional period are that while a critical media education should always include the analysis of the highly ideological and commercial transmissions of the mainstream media, this perspective is never sufficient to explain the complex mediations made by the people involved in production, reception, and meaning-making with media.

To catalogue the changes in communication technology and media use in the first decade of the twenty-first century is not really the purpose of this chapter. Nonetheless, especially in the domains of Web 2.0, where users are simultaneously producers and consumers of media content, the active involvement of young people in media-making today has dramatically shifted. Extraordinary advances in video gaming and simulative worlds such as *Second Life* have pushed us much further towards a new model of immersive media (see Chapter 2 for more on this) where the user is both at the controls and on the screen. While there continue to be significant digital divides that shape how media environments operate, it is worth noting that, for those with even limited access to the Internet, low-cost, user-friendly software (i.e., audio, video, and music production applications, as well as Web 2.0 distribution platforms) has enabled some forms of cultural expression that were unimaginable only a few years ago.

As a result of these and like developments, media consumption and use have shifted dramatically over the past decade. While television and radio still play dominant roles in media consumption, many people, including children and youth, are now consuming media across platforms, often simultaneously. We document young people's changing media lives

extensively in Chapter 2. Here we note, however, that television has taken cues from the Internet, and viewers today are more likely to actively participate in television content, as the wildly popular world of reality television – and its associated web forums – aptly demonstrates. Moreover, with the convergence of the camera, music player, and telephone in pocket-sized cell phones, technologies for media consumption and production have shrunk to the point that many wired young people are now walking broadcasters, able to post images and video to the World Wide Web in real time, all the while listening to their favorite pop music and answering phone calls or texts from friends. In other words, while the technologies of media use change, so too do the perspectives and practices of the users, so much so that debates have emerged that question whether young people's most basic orientation to learning can fit with traditional schooling models.

Natives and Aliens

At the center of discussions about adolescents' learning in relation to contemporary media cultures are ideas about digital natives who are like 'aliens in the classroom.' In an article with that very same title, Bill Green and Chris Bigum (1993) raised the question as to whether educators need to adapt to new types of students whose coming of age has corresponded with the birth of a digital culture. In response, Green and Bigum proposed that teachers should adapt to young people, who are in some ways fundamentally different from previous generations. The questions raised by Green and Bigum are intended as interventions to challenge the traditional skill-and-drill and sage-on-the-stage models of education at a time when students' out-of-school experiences in and with new technologies are setting up a profoundly different engagement with learning. What Green and Bigum tentatively raised as questions, however, hardened in Mark Prensky's (2001) formulation about the differences between Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants. In fact, in Prensky's casting it often seems like students can learn nothing in contemporary classrooms:

> *Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach* [...] A really big *discontinuity* has taken place. One might even call it a 'singularity' – an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no going back. This so-called 'singularity' is the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century

> [...] Today's average college grads have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV) [...] [As a result,] *Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language.* (Prensky, 2001, pp. 1–2, emphasis by Prensky)

Prensky goes on to argue that those raised with the new tools have more than simply a new engagement with learning; he argues they also have entirely new brain structures and wiring.

Whatever one makes of this claim – and the validity of Prensky's brain research has been called into question (McKenzie, 2007) – the more important point is the uncritical manner in which this distinction between educators and learners is posed. The problem with the discourse on newly wired digital natives (i.e., students) versus digital immigrants (i.e., teachers), stuck forever with an accent, is that it upsets the educational apple cart. If the immigrants can never catch up with the natives, how can they be presumptuous enough to teach them new literacies and practices associated with digital technologies?

Fortunately, media educators have long ago crossed this threshold. In fact, the recognition that the media educator can never know everything about evolving media discourses and practices is a central truism in the field. To teach media is to adopt the necessary humility of a Freirean educator who is willing to teach in order to learn. The media educator thus needs to bring strategies, concepts, and frames to the teaching context, but with an open mind towards media content that is often better known by young learners. Ironically, Prensky's formulation seems to ignore this possibility and the history of practices that allow educators to operate at the junction point between new media developments and change in older educational contexts.

Media educators have long harkened to Neil Postman's warning that we are *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and that the average school-age child spends 900 hours per year in the classroom and watches 1500 hours of television over the same period. To a great extent, this has been a *raison d'être* for media educators, who have insisted that we not ignore a powerful form of communication that challenges, and in many cases overwhelms, traditional print literacy. Finding ourselves in a new era, where electronic participation is multimodal and participatory, it is clear to most educators – not just those dedicated to media education – that new

forms of communication require an educational response. This is certainly the case for those who strive to integrate ICT (information communication technology) into the classroom, but also for educators across subject disciplines. Media education too must adjust and adapt to this situation, as we suggest throughout this book. But this is not the first time media educators have had to adjust their practices to new times. Indeed, the type of openness and engagement with evolving modes of communication we see today in education circles has long been the very culture of practice championed within media education.

Media Education has a History to Draw On

If we look back to the 1960s, for instance, we see one of the great periods of growth in media education, much of which was fuelled by the idea that educators could adapt curricula and teaching practices to the increasing role of commercial television and movies in kids' lives. In the UK, this sentiment led educators to develop a screen education movement based around the critical use of movies in classrooms. Drawing from the influential work of writers such as Richard Hoggart (*Uses of Literacy*, 1957) and Raymond Williams (*Culture and Society*, 1958), the purpose of screen education was to study the popular culture texts young people were watching, so that youth would be in a better position to understand their own situation in the world, including the causes of their alienation and marginalization. A similar desire to help young people see connections between school and their everyday lives motivated early initiatives in media education in Australia and Canada. Pedagogically, this led to the development of film analysis and film production courses, which drew inspiration from cultural shifts in the way movies were understood. No longer seen simply as forms of entertainment, film education focused on the way popular Hollywood movies (e.g., *Easy Rider*, 1969 and *Medium Cool*, 1969) reflected social and cultural values, and thus were thought to deserve critical attention. This meant teaching students to understand the language of cinema, as well as the way movies engage with and shape prospects for social and political change.

In the US, school-based media education initiatives were slower to get off the ground. Experiments with television in US classrooms began as early as the 1950s, and throughout the 1960s and 1970s the US Department of State helped to set up instructional television programs in American Somoa, Brazil, El Salvador, India, the Ivory Coast, and Niger in a complicated

program that aimed to both extend American influence and shape emerging education systems (Goldfarb, 2002). It was not until 1978, however, in response to kids' increasing television consumption, that the National Parent–Teacher Association in the US convinced the Office of Education to launch a research and development initiative on the effects of commercial television on children. In short order, this initiative led the Office of Education to recommend

> a national curriculum to enhance students' understanding of commercials, their ability to distinguish fact from fiction, the recognition of competing points of view in programmes, an understanding of the style and formats in public affairs programming, and the ability to understand the relationship between television and printed materials. (Kline, Stewart, and Murphy, 2006, p. 135)

Ultimately, attempts to implement this curriculum were hampered in the early 1980s as President Ronald Reagan's move to deregulate the communications industry challenged efforts to develop media education in US schools. Nonetheless, these early developments would prove crucial in establishing the ground from which more recent media education initiatives have grown.

   Globally, key curricular documents had been produced by the 1980s and 1990s, and media education entered school curricula in many countries around the world in a formal way for the first time. The Canadian province of Ontario led the way, mandating the teaching of media literacy in the high-school English curriculum in 1987. Primary and secondary students across Canada would be receiving some form of media education by the end of the 1990s. Meanwhile, in the UK, the late 1980s witnessed the integration of media education into the curriculum as an examinable subject for students pursuing university entrance. This helped to fuel the popularity of courses in media studies, film studies, and communication studies in schools, and by the 1990s and 2000s additional intermediate courses in media studies were added to the curriculum. In Australia, the late 1980s and 1990s marked a period of expansion in school-based production and media education training, in part because such training was seen to be an ideal way to equip young people with the technical skills and competencies needed to compete in a globally competitive, highly mediated world (McMahon and Quin, 1999; Quin, 2003). Similarly, in various non-English-speaking countries, including Finland, Norway, and Sweden, the 1990s represented a period in

which media literacy developed and expanded (Tufte, 2000). The seeds of change were not, however, confined to countries that had implemented formal media education curricula. Where not included in the formal curriculum, media education also became a pedagogical practice of teachers aware of the impact of the media in the lives of their students. In other words, it is not accurate to assume media education was solely a practice of educators in a select group of countries. In particular, in those countries in the global South, where the broader educational needs of society were still focused on getting children to school and teaching basic literacy and numeracy, media education may not have emerged in the mandated curriculum, but teachers were drawing on media education strategies.

In the US, the development of school-based media education initiatives has been challenging for various reasons. The history of media education in other national contexts indicates that a community of grassroots educators is vital if media literacy is to become part of the school curriculum. Given this fact, the size of the US and the physical distance separating teaching communities has been a problem, as has a lack of state-centered teaching organizations, which can build momentum to support new initiatives (Kubey, 2003). As in many other countries, there is also a shortage of teacher training programs in media education, so interested educators have a difficult time accessing materials and maintaining the momentum needed to sustain media literacy as part of school life. Nonetheless, Kubey (2003) notes that, as of 2000, all 50 states included some education about the media in core curricular areas such as English, social studies, history, civics, and health and consumer education. This does not necessarily mean that media education is taken up in the classroom, however, as issues related to teacher preparation and a return to intensive testing in primary and secondary curricula, as mandated by President George W. Bush's 2001 No Child Left Behind policy, have undercut opportunities to develop school-based media literacy programs.

Because of these difficulties, where media literacy has developed in the US, parents and parent groups have taken a leading role and have generally focused on addressing what are perceived to be the negative effects of media on youth aggression and crime, materialism, sexuality, and alcohol and drug use. Alongside these efforts, a number of key non-governmental organizations have developed over the past two decades and have promoted a more dynamic and, in our judgment, more effective form of media education. The Alliance for a Media Literate America, a national membership organization chartered in 2001 to organize and host the National Media

Education Conference every two years and to promote professional development, is of particular note. So too are the Media Education Foundation, which produces some of the most important media education resources in North America, and the Center for Media Literacy, which offers a helpful MediaLit Kit to promote teaching and learning for a media age.

Media Education in the Twenty-First Century

If media educators have often shown a remarkable ability to adopt and engage with evolving modes of communication, we note that, regardless of national contexts, educators' creative and critical engagement with media is changing, given the emergence and rapid proliferation of new information technologies. In the current period of flux and innovation, the bigger question is thus not whether media education will develop but what type of media education will dominate in schools and other learning environments.

Questions like this have set the stage for a remarkable outpouring of policy discussions and government and inter-governmental policy papers of late in Canada, Europe, and the US, among others (Frau-Meigs and Torrent, 2009; Livingstone, 2009; O'Neill, 2009; Sourbati, 2009; Tornero, 2009). Various organizations (UNESCO; the MacArthur Foundation and the Joan Ganz Cooney Center in the US; the European Commission; the Council of Europe; the Alliance of Civilizations; the Arab League; Nordicom's International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media; and the Media Awareness Network in Canada) are involved in these discussions. In turn, this work is coincident with a series of legislative and policy initiatives – including the 2004 Children's Act in the UK and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is recognized internationally but not always implemented in practice – meant to improve the conditions of childhood. The effects of these developments are nicely captured by Divina Frau-Meigs and Jordi Torrent (2009), who note in the introduction to an important collection of essays (*Mapping Media Education Policies in the World*) that:

> The importance of media education is being gradually recognized worldwide. After the time of the lonesome innovators isolated in their classrooms, after the time of extended communities of practice around researchers and field practitioners working at the grassroots level, the moment of policy-makers has arrived. A threshold has been reached, where the body of knowledge

concerning media literacy has matured, where the different stakeholders implicated in education, in media and in civil society are aware of the new challenges developed by the so-called 'Information Society,' and the new learning cultures it requires for the well-being of its citizens, the peaceful development of civic societies, the preservation of native cultures, the growth of sustainable economies and the enrichment of contemporary social diversity. (p. 15)

This sentiment is, of course, important. We note, however, that with the advent of personal computing and the integration of educational technology approaches in schools and teacher education, a training curriculum that focuses on learning software and mastering camera use and design skills can now be undertaken in a way that ignores a critical analysis of consumer broadcast media altogether. We argue, however, that media literacy must always involve an analysis of media texts and dominant and powerful institutions, in conjunction with opportunities for creative media production that speaks to and builds from the challenges, dreams, and visions that are part of young people's lives. What we reject, in other words, are those approaches to the use of new communication technologies in schools where technological mastery is seen as an end in and of itself. We recognize that newly accessible video editing suites and broadcasting (or narrowcasting) opportunities made available through Web 2.0 platforms (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, wiki spaces, and so on) can enable forms of production by young people that were until recently only possible in the well-resourced and highly specialized workplaces of the media industries. We further recognize that technical skills training (in camera use, sound design, and new forms of media distribution, etc.) helps young people to learn key competencies that can open up important and meaningful job opportunities, so it must be part of media education. But to conceive of media literacy as only a form of technical training oriented towards job markets is to woefully understate the critical and civic concerns that have long informed the field. And these concerns matter today not only because they speak to the history of media literacy but because consumer media culture, including new digital technologies, have a direct bearing on key normative ideals in our lives, including our ideas about democracy, community, and our own social futures. Understanding contemporary media, including newly available digital tools, can thus never just be about technical training, because the meaning and effects of this media extend well beyond questions of skills. Indeed, to understand contemporary media environments, we need to ask

more fundamental questions, including about how the social and political influence of the media is changing and remaking our everyday lives.

To write a book about media literacy today, we not only have to consider what role media education has played up to the present but also recognize what role it could or should play in the future. We argue for an approach that unites the robust tradition of media analysis and production that has been the hallmark of media education for the past forty years with the emerging domain of new communication technologies in education – an approach that focuses on those elements of these technologies that are participatory, collaborative, and creative. Following Roger Silverstone (2004), we also contend that media literacy must always have a moral agenda. It is not enough that media literacy be understood in relation to the development of the individual and his or her skills, nor to think of media literacy as a tool that primarily serves economic interests and fosters 'skills for [...] employability' (O'Neill, 2009, p. 8). Rather, media literacy must serve the common good by enabling young people to become active citizens, contributors to the public life of our shared worlds.

> Media literacy should be a moral agenda, always debated, never fixed, but permanently inscribed in public discourse and private practice, a moral discourse which recognizes our responsibility for the other person in a world of great conflict, tragedy, intolerance and indifference, and which critically engages with our media's incapacity (as well as its occasional capacity) to engage with the reality of that difference, responsibly and humanely. For it is in our understanding of the world, and our willingness and capability to act in it, that our humanity or inhumanity is defined. (Silverstone, 2004, pp. 440–441)

To advance this media literacy project, we note that there are widely differing discourses in scholarly circles on what constitutes 'literacy' today, each of which has quite distinct effects on how media, technology, and literacy are considered and taught. Literacy, whether new or multiple, whether digital or traditional, continues to hold a place of importance in public and educational debates worldwide (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). It is a competence that is indispensable in the 'semiotic economies' (Luke, 2003) of the twenty-first century; yet, its very qualities are the subject of intense contestation in educational and governmental circles. As we are well aware, the meaning of literacy is unstable and in flux, a vehicle for empowerment now lying in pieces on the garage floor while we work diligently with new tools to repair it.

Given this backdrop, throughout this book we are somewhat reluctant to transpose the term literacy from its associations with alphabet-driven textual reading and writing to multimodal (text, image, sound) encoding and decoding. A new term such as 'mediacy' might be more useful going forward, because some of the new codes and conventions of encoding and decoding with contemporary media technologies are radically different from traditional ideas about reading and writing. We accept, however, that there is an established and sophisticated discourse on media literacy to which we wish to contribute. Like literacy, media literacy can be a schooled capacity and competency, an ability to interpret and produce media texts that results from a formal media education. But, like speech, media literacy is also a domain of learning outside of schools, one children begin to develop years before they come to school. The difference between that which is formally presented as media education and that which is learned in streets and rec rooms often rests on criticality. As consumers and sometimes producers of media, young people learn a great deal about the workings of media and about the world around them. Formal media education takes what may appear natural in a media-saturated environment, however, and challenges learners to see through facets of media that may have been uncritically absorbed. To a great extent, this is the common understanding among educators and scholars of the process of media education and its outcome, media literacy.

This said, three key points should be raised in relation to this definition of media literacy and media education. First, media literacy is not something only learned from teachers. Inhabiting a media-saturated world by necessity involves immersion in the codes and conventions of media, and a learning process, though later in childhood, equivalent to that of learning a first language. Examples of this are the critical capacities of eight-year-olds to see through the false promises of advertising and the gradual accumulation by children of procedural knowledge of media cues (e.g., this is a flashback sequence; there was a cut in the dramatic sequence from one location to another; a close-up of an object – a knife, for example – suggests a future development in the plot). To see how television teaches its viewers these cues over time, starting simply and gradually and becoming more complex, one only has to look at a typical demographic progression, say from *Barney* through *Scooby Doo* to *90210* or *The O.C.* Thus, if media literacy is not something learned only in structured learning environments, there are two wild cards embedded in media education from the start. On the one hand, there is the hand of the powerful in the mix – media corporations and those

corporations whose products are pitched in the media. On the other, there is an insider knowledge already possessed by the learner, one that in many instances outstrips that of the teacher.

The second point to be made is that media literacy is more than just something we should teach – a necessary component of citizenship education that is essential in increasingly semiotic societies. Rather, media education offers an alternative to school curricula that were developed in the nineteenth century and have only slowly evolved. Media education provides an opportunity par excellence to get 'in the paint' with our students (to borrow an expression from the world of professional basketball) and to use contemporary media artifacts and themes to make schooling more engaging and exciting for the average student. Ultimately, the vast majority of our students are consumers and fans of at least some media texts. These texts are produced for the most part by media organizations that relentlessly research their audiences, and who produce a great bulk of material for those demographics that are seen to mobilize spending power in the marketplace. Taking media texts seriously is not only about critically engaging such texts, however; it is also a way to open windows into the lifeworlds our students are inhabiting, valuing, and thinking about in relation to their own futures.

Finally, the third point is to recognize how the ground has shifted in recent years to include media production as an integral component of media literacy and education. If there is a central thread running through contemporary definitions of media literacy, it is in fact that this literacy *should* involve interpreting *and* creating media texts. The notion that media production is an integral component of media literacy is a significant development in the short history of the field. Returning to foundational texts such as Len Masterman's *Teaching the Media* (1985), one sees that it is the interpretation of texts and the interests of the (usually corporate) producers that was the central question of the day. Contemporary models of media education, conversely, tie together the consumption and production of media, recognizing both as equally significant elements of media literacy. This book draws on both sides of this coin to develop a model of media education that is responsive to both the powerful influence of the commercial media and the tremendous potentials associated with independent media creation and distribution in an era marked by technological miniaturization and new media expressions. In Chapter 2, we set the stage for this model of media literacy by looking closely at young people's mediated lives, including changes in the way children and youth are growing up today.