Media, Society, and Us

Media literacy functions as a tangled web, intersecting and connecting nearly every aspect of our lives. This chapter invites you to begin to envision what that web looks like in your own life.

Literacy as Social Practice

At one level, all learning is inherently individual. You didn't become literate just by watching someone else write or by listening to someone else read. At some point, you had to acquire these skills by doing them for yourself.

But whether or how well a particular child learns how to read or write isn't just about their own individual skills; it depends on a variety of *social* factors. Do their surroundings include an abundance of books in the language or languages they hear at home? How about skilled teachers and role models? Does their family or culture prioritize literacy? Do instruction techniques match the child's needs?

In places that emphasize empirical testing, it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that literacy isn't just about easy-to-measure, individual skills like phonics or fluency. Actual reading and writing are about sending and receiving communication using shared symbol systems. That makes traditional literacy an inherently social—and media!—practice.

Even comprehension and interpretation are dependent on social context. Our culture and community shape how we make meaning.

Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate the social nature of interpretation is to think of words that have changed meaning over time. Consider, for example, the famous Christmas carol, "Deck the Halls." In 1862, when Scottish musician Thomas Oliphant composed the song's lyrics, "don we now our *gay* apparel," he wasn't referencing a modern construction of sexual identity. One hundred years later, the word *gay* still meant happy, carefree, or celebratory, as in the Flintstones cartoon theme song, "we'll have a gay old time." Yet today, many children who hear those songs may be confused about the antiquated use of the word *gay*, especially if they have heard the word used as a slur. The phonics involved in reading the word *gay* haven't changed—the cultural context has.

To say that literacy is a social practice is another way of saying that we don't read or write in a vacuum. Consider how your interpretations are shaped:

› By the infrastructure and financial barriers that must be overcome to access information (including who controls the use of paywalls, which restrict access to paid subscribers)

› By which voices are present or omitted, marginalized or celebrated, privileged or intentionally silenced

› By whether you use or understand pop culture or literary references

› By your peers and role models

› By which tropes, genres, and vocabulary are deemed appropriate for particular audiences or circumstances (for example, when or whether it is okay to curse, use slang, or communicate by using abbreviations)

All these social variables are integral to making meaning and communicating with an alphabetic symbol system.

Media Literacy as Social Practice

As renowned critical pedagogy theorists Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo wrote, we need to understand literacy as much more than a set of mechanical processes. We need "to view it as the relationship of learners to the world" (Freire & Macedo 1987). One of the great values of media literacy education is that it embodies this Freirean vision of reading the word *and* the world. Media literacy competencies not only enable people to analyze and evaluate discrete media texts, but they also enable people to examine the social aspects of those texts and the ways that media shape society.

Media literacy as *literacy* is about exploring our overlapping relationships to key aspects of life:

> Information—Where and how we get ideas about the world; how we make meaning from stories and symbol systems; how we learn; how our meaning making is both individual and social; whether our information sources facilitate or obfuscate reason, logic, and evidence

> Inspiration—How and where we find it; how we communicate through the arts; how we make choices to nurture or suppress creativity

> Labor—How we find and engage in meaningful work (both income generating and volunteer); what types of work exists as viable options; where work takes place

> Authority—What we accept as proper or credible societal authorities (government, law, religion, schools, media, family, and so on); how we teach children to trust *us* as authorities and to question media authorities at the same time (a key to success in a world in which misinformation and disinformation will be common)

> Physical sustenance—How we choose and obtain the things we need for physical survival; how we care for ourselves and the planet

> One another—How we engage in the various communities to which we belong (for example, online, our neighborhood, our workplace, our nation, the world); how we define the parameters of our broad social contract—the responsibilities, rules, and skills that we share in order to live together productively—in a world in which we may be in closer contact with someone on another continent than with people who live down the block; where we find common ground and how we respond to forces that intentionally try to divide us; how we establish and teach shared values like democracy, fairness, justice, and pluralism

Media literacy education is important because media play a central role in every one of these relationships.

To be sure, part of media literacy is learning to decode specific types of media texts. More on that in subsequent chapters. But helping children to become fluent *readers* and skilled *writers* in the multiple forms that are common to current media is about much more than simply teaching them to question advertising claims or to learn how to stay safe online. It's about opening up the world—and all its possibilities—to them. When we say that media literacy is an essential life skill, this is what we mean.

PAUSE TO **REFLECT**

Consider the role that media play (or have played) in each of the areas described above. Give one example of a way that media have improved that facet of your life and one way that they have been an obstacle. Can you identify any ways in which your use of media links multiple areas of your life?

When we conceptualize media literacy as *literacy,* we focus on opportunities. In thirty years of education workshops and conferences, I never *ever* heard anyone justify teaching kids to read in order to protect them from dangerous or deceptive print materials. It's not that problematic print materials don't exist. You have probably seen at least one children's book that repeats damaging stereotypes. And in our online lives, we are likely to come across text-based messages that are intended to mislead. Dangers exist, and we address them. But we rightfully choose not to make them the center of our literacy practice. That's because we understand that the primary challenge we are addressing is illiteracy, not bad books.

To be sure, we select books carefully and urge publishers to step up their game, but in our time with children, we offer strategies like daily read-alouds, print-rich environments, and exposure to the delight and discovery that await those who learn to decipher and communicate with alphabetic symbol systems. We emphasize connections, encouraging families to read to children as a way to strengthen bonds and enjoy time together.

Because image-based communication is accessible to young children in ways that print is not, media literacy education will use strategies that are a bit different from those we use to encourage print literacy. For example, rather than encouraging the creation of a screen media parallel to a print-rich environment, we'll focus on creating an inquiry-rich environment. But if we accept that media literacy is literacy for the multimedia world we actually live in, then we should approach it like print literacy. We don't ignore potential hazards, but we also don't fixate on them. We open up possibilities.

Source

Freire, P., & D. Macedo. 1987. *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.