

Taking the Next Step

Compared to other books on media and children, this book has asked you to do something unusual. It has asked you to see the challenge as illiteracy rather than media.

The distinction is about perspective. Effective media literacy educators are always well informed about media and media-related issues. And when we see media infringing on our individual or collective well-being, we act, engaging in media reform efforts the way we would any other vital civic endeavor. But those efforts, even when undertaken on behalf of little ones, center media, not children. No one would ever suggest measuring the efficacy of teaching or learning by how much media improved.

So, as educators, we focus on the *literacy* part of media literacy. That choice shapes the way we think about our responses and responsibilities.

A Media Literacy Guild?

Since at least medieval times, people in the trades belonged to guilds that supervised training and designated skill levels: Apprentice, Journeyman, Master. I sometimes wonder what the levels would look like if media literacy education had a guild. Perhaps the titles would go something like this:

- Curious Seeker
- Apprentice Questioner
- Adept Thinker
- Reflective Maker
- Wise Teacher



PAUSE TO REFLECT

At the end of each part of this book, the Pause to Reflect box asked you to write one sentence that you want to remember. Take a look at what you wrote. What was it about the sentences you selected that caught your attention? Do they express messages that you want to share, and if so, with whom, how, and when could you make that happen? How will you explain why you think they are important enough to share?

If you are reading this book as part of a class or professional learning community, you might want to swap quotes and discuss everyone's choices.

Or maybe the process is messier than a neat progression and we earn and hold several badges at once. As you come to the end of this book, what title(s) would you give yourself? What would you have to do to level up?

Closing Thoughts

One of the media analysis question categories is *context*. And there is a very particular context for this book. In 1974 (the year of the interview, not of its publication), philosopher Hannah Arendt explained, "If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything

any longer” (Errera 1978). Fast-forward half a century and, abetted by social media, where lies spread exponentially faster and further than facts (Silverman 2017), we are living Arendt’s words.

In countries all over the world, educators at all levels are hearing from students and families who say, “I just don’t know what to believe anymore.” It’s not unusual for teachers to encounter children and families who repeat (sometimes wildly outlandish) conspiracy theories. In some places, the very idea of evidence-based critical thinking is becoming anathema.

This context of conspiracy and mistrust has inspired increasingly urgent calls for universal media literacy education—a call which you are now more prepared to answer. Media literacy education, alone, can’t bridge every division or stop disinformation campaigns from damaging democracy. But approached as literacy, with a focus on critical inquiry and reflection, it can prime young people to spot common ground and use it to engage in productive dialogue and community action.

It’s difficult to imagine a successful democracy without citizens who have the will and skill to

- › Engage respectfully
- › Communicate effectively
- › Evaluate sources and evidence with a logical and open mind
- › Understand the experiences and values that have shaped their own perspective
- › Recognize the experiences and values that shape others’ perspectives

These are the central things that media literacy education brings to the civic table. Not screen time debates. Not special lessons about harmful media messages. Media literacy educators teach children to

- › Use inquiry to become discerning, rather than mistrustful

- › Become powerful, thoughtful, ethical, creative communicators
- › Treasure the rich interpretations and human connections that result from hearing multiple perspectives.
- › Use media technologies to create, rather than separate from community
- › Seek adult guidance without expecting grown-ups to provide a single “true” interpretation or one right answer
- › Have the confidence to answer, “How do you know?” and “How could we find out?” questions for themselves
- › Consider the common good and value the principle of “justice for all”

In a digital world, these are as important to being literate as learning how to decode alphabetic text.

As the recent *Report of the NCTE Task Force on Critical Media Literacy* noted, “as society and technology change, so does literacy” (NCTE 2021, 7). For some, integrating media literacy education will require a re-assessment of many parts of the curriculum, not just the media they use. It’s not viable to teach children how to find credible sources and also feed them versions of their nation’s history that ignore those sources. It’s unfair to tell them that they have the power to make things better and then refuse to challenge inequities that undermine that power. It’s disingenuous to teach them to value reliable evidence and then dismiss the consensus judgement of the scientists who published ninety-seven percent of the climate research studies in peer-reviewed journals, all of whom agree that human choices are accelerating global-warming (see, e.g., Skeptical Science, <https://skepticalscience.com/global-warming-scientific-consensus-advanced.htm>). And if all of that sounds “too serious” for early childhood education, take comfort in knowing that it is possible to surround children with kindness while also recognizing that there is nothing kind about letting injustices stand unchallenged.

As early childhood educators, it is within our grasp to acknowledge that the world is complex without abandoning developmentally appropriate practice. Media makers like the *Sesame Street* team and Fred Rogers have modeled how to be simple without being simplistic. If they can tackle challenges like racism, disease, fear, and even death—then media literacy educators can help children learn to analyze and create media messages in developmentally appropriate ways. And no matter the media messages we explore together, we can ground the practice of media literacy education in the joys of discovery and learning that make working with children in their early years so amazing.

Continuing the Journey

When I was an elementary school student growing up in a suburb of Chicago, nearly every year our class set out on a field trip to the massive

Museum of Science and Industry. Our teachers and a tour guide took us through a few exhibits, set a few ground rules, and then freed us to roam as we pleased (with chaperones nearby) until it was time to meet up back at the bus. That free time was always the best part.

On your media literacy journey, you've now received the tour guide's introduction and are free to wander. And you aren't alone. You're joining a growing community of early childhood educators across the globe. Let yourself

Explore. Re-imagine. Question.
Listen. Create. Play. Share. Reflect.

And finally, we end with the most important media literacy question of all: *What else do you want to know?*

Sources

Arendt, H. [1974] 1978. "Hannah Arendt: From an Interview," interview by Roger Herrera. *The New York Review of Books*, October 26. www.nybooks.com/articles/1978/10/26/hannah-arendt-from-an-interview.

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Silverman, C. 2017. *Lies, Damn Lies, and Viral Content*. Report. New York: Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia University. doi:10.7916/D8Q81RHH.