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The State of Media Literacy: A Response to Potter

Renee Hobbs

Potter's essay on the state of media literacy purports to represent the current state of the field, but omits much of the innovative work that has emerged in the last 10 years from scholars across the fields of communication, education, and public health. The review does not include mention of the development of numerous media literacy education initiatives by educational practitioners working in both formal and in informal education. By conceptualizing media literacy as a response to counteract the negative effects of mass media and popular culture, Potter fails to capture the depth and complexity of the field.

My mother always told me that if you can't say something nice, you shouldn't say anything at all. But then again, she never really understood my work as a scholar, where knowledge-production and evaluation are intertwined and embedded in the practice of critique. In his invited essay in Volume 54(4) of the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* (JoBEM), Jim Potter identifies a list of divergent interpretations of the term "media literacy" and frames the field as an incoherent mess. Potter claims that there is "no consensus as scholars continue to add and subtract ideas" (2010, p. 679), and identifies the numerous definitions of the terms "media" and "literacy," as well as debates about the appropriate learning outcomes of media literacy education. From this, he proposes four common themes where he claims there is general agreement across the writings about media literacy; two of which emphasize media literacy as a response to the "wide range of potentially negative effects on individuals" and position it as "helping people protect themselves" from potentially negative effects (2010, p. 681). Potter then reviews various characteristics of media literacy interventions, defined as the techniques people use to help others avoid potentially harmful media exposures. He describes the literature on parental mediation, which he frames as a form of media literacy. He concludes the state-of-the-scholarship essay by noting that nearly "all the studies in the large media effects literature ... might qualify as tests of media literacy interventions"

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(2010, p. 688). He briefly reviews selected media effects studies on media violence, sexual portrayals, health, stereotypes, and fear-inducing media.

This review essay is particularly disappointing because many readers are familiar with Potter's significant contributions to the field of media literacy over the course of his career, particularly those who appreciate his popular textbook, *Media Literacy*, now in its fifth edition. Providing a robust and meaningful alternative to the standard industry-oriented overview, Potter's textbook frames media literacy as a complement of knowledge and intellectual skills, where it defines critical thinking skills as including the components of analysis, evaluation, grouping, induction, deduction, synthesis, and abstraction. In another book, *Theory of Media Literacy: A Cognitive Approach*, Potter claims that people who are knowledgeable about media industries, media messages, and media effects may have a better appreciation of the context in which messages circulate; for example, such knowledge may help people become more active, strategic, and goal-seeking in their use of media (Potter, 2004).

Unfortunately, readers of the *Journal of Broadcasting and Mass Media* are not well-served by this invited essay which claims in its title to depict the state of media literacy. While purporting to represent the current state of the field, Potter omits much of the innovative and important work that has emerged in the last 10 years from scholars across the fields of communication, education, and public health. The review does not include mention of the development of numerous media literacy education initiatives by educational practitioners working in both formal and informal education. Most importantly, in conceptualizing media literacy primarily as a response to counteract the negative effects of mass media and popular culture, Potter's vision of media literacy mischaracterizes the depth and complexity of the field.

Some readers may wonder why Potter does not mention some of his own most recent empirical research in this review essay. Most notably missing is his important collaborative work with Byrne and colleagues, where they developed an intervention that urged children to examine the difference between media violence and real-world violence, emphasizing the negative effects of viewing violence. Under some circumstances, media literacy pedagogy may accidentally activate boomerang effects, where instruction inadvertently increases, rather than decreases, desired outcomes (Byrne, 2009). Efforts to improve children's understanding of television violence via a media literacy intervention may actually heighten the salience or appeal of violence if videos used in the lesson prime emotional arousal (Byrne, Linz, & Potter, 2009). This research helps us more deeply understand the importance of attention to instructional design principles in the practice of media literacy education. Referring to the boomerang effect in the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* review, Potter mentions only that "some interventions are more successful than others" (2010, p. 688).

In challenging the overall framing of media literacy and specific choices of scholarly content that are presented in Potter's review essay, I do not mean to dismiss or trivialize those who have concerns about a materialistic, hyper-sexualized, and hyper-violent media culture that may impact personal and social identity. Indeed,

along with Potter and many *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* readers, I share similar concerns about the role of mass media, popular culture, and digital media and technology in the lives of children and young people. But those who position media literacy education simply as an antidote to mass media exposure may be blinded inadvertently to the wider range of aims of media literacy education, thus missing out on important evidence and information that contributes to the development of digital and media literacy both in the United States and around the world.

Momentum for Digital and Media Literacy

Potter does not inform *JoBEM* readers about the rise of support for media literacy in the digital media policy landscape, or how educational reformers position media literacy as a form of critical thinking as evidenced by the presence of media literacy in the Common Core standards (National Governors Association & the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Slowly but surely, digital and media literacy now are becoming a basic part of contemporary discourse.

In the United States and in Europe, significant strides were made in the inclusion of media literacy in the context of discussions about education reform and technological change. This discourse increasingly included perspectives from mainstream governmental and educational institutions. In England, the Office of Communications (Ofcom) has a major policy initiative on media literacy underway (Livingstone, 2008). The European Commission's commitment to media literacy has supported the development of robust scholarship and information sharing. In countries as diverse as Turkey and Singapore, media literacy education is now part of the national curriculum. In the United States, several federal agencies developed actions to promote media literacy education. For example, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) developed Admongo (www.admongo.gov), an online game for media literacy for children aged 8–12 to help them analyze advertising (Moore & Hobbs, 2011). There is a reference to media literacy's importance in the U.S. Department of Education in their National Technology Plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The FCC's "Future of Media" initiative explicitly sought public comment on this question: "What kinds of digital and media literacy programs are appropriate to help people both use new information and communication technologies effectively and to analyze and evaluate the news and information they are receiving?" (Barnett, 2010). The Knight Commission's 2009 report, "*Informing Communities: Sustaining Democracy in a Digital Age*" identifies media literacy in relation to enhancing the information capacity of individuals, particularly in relation to citizenship (Knight Commission, 2009). Most importantly, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation invited more than \$80 million in research on digital media and learning, to support a variety of research and practical projects that are transforming the field.

Framed as an expanded conceptualization of literacy, digital and media literacy are recognized as tools for strengthening young people's participation in civic and

political life (Benkler, 2007; Bennett, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2007; Rheingold, 2008), enabling them to seek out information on relevant issues, to evaluate the quality of information available, and to engage in dialogue with others to form coalitions. A recent study found that nearly half of high school students from 21 high schools in California engaged in various classroom activities designed to support media literacy competencies, including critically analyzing the trustworthiness of websites, using the Internet to get information about political or social issues, and creating content for the web. These activities are associated with higher rates of online politically driven participation (Kahne, Feezell, & Lee, 2010).

This year, the College Board used a media literacy question in its essay portion of the SAT, asking students to respond to this question: "Do people benefit from forms of entertainment that show so-called reality, or are such forms of entertainment harmful" (Bunin, 2011). The increasing visibility of media literacy on the national education agenda is embodied in the words of Ernest J. Wilson, the Walter Annenberg Chair in Communication and dean of the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism at the University of Southern California, who, at a meeting of the Aspen Institute's Forum on Communication and Society in 2010, described media literacy as "the new humanities" (Wilson, 2010).

The Relationship between Protectionist and Empowerment Perspectives

Tension between protectionist and empowerment perspectives was long part of the media literacy field (Hobbs, 1998), as scholars and educators debated whether to emphasize media literacy as an expanded conceptualization of literacy or as a means to counter the negative effects of mass media and popular culture. In his review essay, Potter recycles ideas from within a subset of the media effects tradition to put forward his own special vision of media literacy—one that has been rejected by the National Association for Media Literacy Education, the national membership organization of the field. By framing a definition of media literacy only in relation to the goal of reducing negative effects of exposure to mass media, Potter is pushing an agenda which in fact has a controversial status among scholars both in the United States and around the world, where there is a robust ongoing debate about the relative value and limitations of both protectionist and empowerment perspectives in media literacy education.

Noteworthy for its absence is any articulation of the empowerment perspective within the field of media literacy. Generated by the rise of social media and other digital tools that enable anyone to be an author, there is an explosion of interest in media literacy as a tool for empowerment. Emerging theoretically from constructivist learning theory and articulated in the work of visual literacy specialists, media arts educators, and youth development professionals, this approach to media literacy emphasizes young people as capable, resilient and active in their choices as both media consumers and as creative producers. It values and celebrates the pleasure

that children and young people experience as media consumers and as media makers (Jenkins et al., 2007). A wide variety of initiatives in youth-produced media reflect the fundamental belief that media-making can be a means for building self-esteem and forming identity, developing critical thinking skills about media and technology, and promoting intercultural exchange (Cole, Biel, Pai, & Chand, 2007). In one example, researchers developed a 3-year longitudinal study to examine a learning environment intentionally designed to provide urban youth with tools and learning opportunities that would allow them to create, collaborate, and communicate with new media production technologies. The program offered a series of after-school clubs in graphic design, digital broadcasting, movie making, music recording and remixing, and video game development. Results show that, with effective mentoring, students are able to shift their sense of identity to position themselves as authors (Barron et al., 2010). Scholarly inquiries on the practices that contribute to youth empowerment are a vital part of research in digital and media literacy education.

It is important to acknowledge that Potter's conceptualization of media literacy as an intervention designed to counter the negative effects of mass media and popular culture is indeed reflected in some of the scholarly literature of the field. In his systematic review of over 150 empirical studies in the field, Martens (2010) notes that some communication scholars position media literacy education as a solution to the problem of negative media effects like media violence, gender and racial stereotyping, and bias in the news. When only looking at the social scientific literature in media studies, it might be possible to believe that a protectionist focus is dominant. However, when the lens is widened to include the published work of critical/cultural scholars across the disciplinary landscape of rhetoric, English education, film studies, technology education, and other fields, it is clear that most reject an explicitly protectionist approach to media literacy education. For example, educators who publish accounts of practice in journals including *Learning, Media and Technology*, the *International Journal of Learning and Media*, *English Journal*, the *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, and the *Journal of Adult and Adolescent Literacy*, incorporate media literacy into their pedagogy with a decidedly semiotic, critical/cultural, constructivist or empowerment perspective. These four theoretical frameworks are barely mentioned in Potter's review essay, even though, historically speaking, they reflect a fundamental articulation of the "active audience" tradition as embodied across several disciplines (stemming from a line of scholars that includes John Dewey, Marshall McLuhan, Stuart Hall, Umberto Eco, Neil Postman, Len Masterman, David Buckingham, James Carey, Henry Giroux, John Fiske, and Henry Jenkins).

Many media literacy educators both embrace and reject protectionism, recognizing the importance of honoring the very real pleasures that students experience as both media consumers and producers, and observing that young people themselves often resent being positioned as victims of an evil media system. Livingstone (2004) pointed out that the media effects tradition incorporates a view of audiences as vulnerable while media literacy education is rooted in the conceptualization of

the active audience. For these reasons, parent advocacy organizations stand back from claiming that media is a negative force in the lives of children and youth and emphasize an empowerment perspective. For example, Common Sense Media identifies in its mission: "We believe in teaching our kids to be savvy, respectful and responsible media interpreters, creators, and communicators. We can't cover their eyes but we can teach them to see" (Common Sense Media, 2010).

Today, a considerable amount of important work in digital and media literacy comes from many people working outside the circle of media effects scholarship. This work should be acknowledged and welcomed by communication scholars. For example, rhetoricians offer up a version of media literacy as it applies to the Internet (Gurak, 2001); cultural studies scholars explore the value of teaching about parody with shows like *The Simpsons* (Gray, 2006); clinical psychologists demonstrate how media literacy can reduce anxiety about the depiction of terrorism on television news (Comer Furr, Beidas, Weiner, & Kendall, 2008); public policy scholars examine the impact of youth media arts groups on civic engagement and social activism (Levine, 2008); education scholars document empowering instructional practices that help African-American teens forge more complex interpretations of narrative films depicting Black masculinity (Staples, 2008); and physicians and medical researchers develop online educational interventions for media literacy, showing its utility as a means to prevent substance abuse (Primack, Sidani, Carroll, & Fine, 2009). None of these scholars is aligned theoretically with the media effects tradition but all make important contributions to the field of media literacy education.

Even as the diversity of scholars and practitioners increases in the face of rapid changes to the media environment that result from the Internet and social media, an emerging consensus about the aims of digital and media literacy prevails. Potter makes no mention of the National Association for Media Literacy Education's Core Principles of Media Literacy Education, developed by 10 present and former board members of the national membership organization and officially ratified by its members. The Core Principles document identifies the purpose of media literacy education as "to help individuals of all ages develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression that they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators and active citizens in today's world" (NAMLE, 2007, p. 1).

In that document, national leaders in media literacy education reject one of Potter's main formulations: that the teaching and learning of media literacy is based on a constructed intervention designed by researchers to increase knowledge about media violence, sexuality, health, or stereotypes in an inoculation or transmission-oriented model of education. Media literacy leaders state it this way: "Media literacy education builds skills that encourage healthy lifestyles and decision-making; it is not about inoculating people against presumed or actual harmful media effects" (NAMLE, 2007, p. 5). To this reader's chagrin, even the media literacy literature that is clearly framed as a response to negative media effects gets shortchanged in Potter's essay, which does not recognize that communication and public health scholars chose to adopt both practical implementation strategies and theoretical models to

account for how media literacy may actually work to counteract negative effects. For example, omitted from his review essay are the past 15 years of scholarship from Austin and colleagues at Washington State University. This body of knowledge that provides a sophisticated theoretical framework, the Message Interpretation Process (MIP), treats receivers as active decision-makers engaged in a process of interpretation and understanding, where decision-making takes place through both logical and emotional routes (Austin, Pinkleton & Funabiki, 2007).

In addition, there is no mention of the development of university-school partnership models as a means to bring media literacy to young people through near-peer instructional models, as for example in the work of Professor Zaslow at Pace University, whose undergraduate students worked in New York City youth media programs (Khan & Reinoso, 2008) or Professor Scharrer at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, who demonstrated how children's interpretations of media violence may be transformed through a learning experience implemented by undergraduate students (Scharrer, 2005, 2006). Much curriculum development in media literacy education in both the United States and around the world comes from the work of practitioners in collaboration with scholars working in specific educational contexts. Based on time-honored practices of teacher action research, researchers and teachers generally work to first identify learning outcomes, then develop activities based on inquiry and constructivist learning principles, and then create meaningful and authentic approaches to assessment that focus on the learning demonstrating competence in meeting learning outcomes (Hobbs, 2007; Schwarz & Brown, 2005). Sadly, it is common for some researchers to first conduct a content analysis of a set of media texts to produce evidence of their problematic characteristics and then propose media literacy education as a means to address the presumed negative influence of these texts on audiences, stumbling into the educational arena without learning first about the existing attitudes, knowledge and interpretations of learners or teachers, but holding firm to expectations about dominant interpretations presumed to be in place and ready to replace them with (their own) better oppositional readings.

Potter offers a reductionist vision that ignores both important intellectual traditions from semiotics, cultural studies, constructivism and empowerment perspectives as well as new work that examines differential levels of digital literacy competencies in adults and young adults (Hargittai, 2005, 2009); media literacy practices related to issues of representation (Gainer, 2010), digital media, remix and informal education (Richards & Gomez, 2010), civic engagement and journalism (Bailin, 2010), narrative and digital storytelling (Ohler, 2006), just to name a few of the new areas of recent work emerging in digital and media literacy scholarship.

The Aims of Education

In the review essay, Potter summarizes research on parental mediation, describing parents' formulations of time/content rules, co-viewing and talk about media as a

type of “natural intervention” in media literacy (2010, p. 685). But few scholars would conflate parental mediation with media literacy even though both consider the media use behaviors of children and youth. In a systematic review of the literature, Mendoza notes that “the parental mediation literature, although it identifies mediation styles and examines the effects on children, fails to connect to research and practices from media literacy” (2009, p. 31). The roles of parents and educators are quite distinct, especially in the context of exploration of values issues. Mendoza questions whether parents offering “declarative, value-laden statements” about television (a recommended technique of active mediation) promotes critical thinking and points out that “the research on active mediation does not reflect—nor does it draw from—a model of inquiry that is so central to media literacy education” (2009, p. 37).

More than 20 years ago, Masterman (1985) introduced the concept of critical autonomy as a primary objective of media literacy education. In *Teaching the Media*, Masterman argues that the key task of media teachers is to “develop in pupils enough self-confidence and critical maturity to be able to apply critical judgments to media texts which they will encounter in the future” (1985, p. 24). To accomplish this, pedagogical practices must be emphatically student-centered and inquiry-oriented, helping students interrogate the process of making meaning through critical investigation using strategies of both *close reading* (also called deconstruction or decoding) and *media production*, where the practices of brainstorming, scriptwriting, and video or website production are enacted, not for the primary purpose of developing vocational or professional skills, but as a means to promote transfer of critical thinking skills from the classroom to the contexts of home, community, and culture.

For these reasons, some media literacy educators emphasize the pedagogy of inquiry learning and reject mere knowledge transmission that focuses on media history, economics, and industry structure, common topics of the typical Mass Media and Society course. Of course, knowledge can be valuable when it deepens students’ understanding of the political, social, economic, and historical context in which media messages circulate. But in traditional content-based classrooms, students may gain short-term, decontextualized knowledge about the media but not develop critical thinking or analysis skills that can be applied to media messages in the context of their day-to-day life (Bragg, 2002). Today, the rise of interest in the use of digital media in schools leads to some educators who are focused on teaching children various digital technology production skills in merely a technical/technician sense (Masterman, 1985) or in a decontextualized way that emphasizes only the “how to” dimensions of social media tool use (Richardson, 2006). This promises to foreshorten and narrow the complex set of digital and media literacy competencies. For these reasons, key concepts of media literacy education (authorship, audience, representation, genre, language, technology, etc.) must be emphasized as analytical tools that support the practice of both analyzing and creating messages (Buckingham, 2003).

Examining Potter's essay as a whole, a reader might suppose that he offers a rationale for media literacy not based on the development of critical thinking or communication skills at all, but based instead on a type of inoculation or persuasion. For example, he favorably reviews examples where researchers aim to change students' attitudes or behaviors to more closely reflect their own views about mass media and popular culture. In examining these studies, Martens points out that "rather than encouraging children and adolescents to understand the mechanics of television, evaluative strategies try to create negative evaluation about what is viewed" (2010, p. 13). Indeed, some communication professors do make use of curriculum materials that offer a one-sided, essentially persuasive perspective on issues of media violence, stereotypes, representation, advertising, or media ownership. But "persuasion as education" is an approach that is explicitly rejected by media literacy leaders, who write:

Media literacy education is not about replacing students' perspectives with someone else's (your own, a teacher's, a media critic's, an expert's, etc.). Sharing a critique of media without also sharing the skills that students need to critically analyze media for themselves is not sound MLE [media literacy education] practice. This includes presenting media literacy videos, films, book, or other curriculum materials as a substitute for teaching critical inquiry skills. (NAMLE, 2007, p. 5)

Too many college faculty view media literacy as simply a watered-down version of the standard content-based Media and Society course for non-majors, and this view does considerable disservice to the field. At the heart of digital and media literacy, education is not the mere transmission of facts and information about media industries, audiences and effects, but the goal of promoting a deep understanding of the concept of *constructedness*. Since at least the 1980s the field has worked to enable people to recognize "the constructed nature of media texts, and thereby to show how media representations [reinforce] the ideologies of dominant groups in society" (Buckingham, 2004, p. 8). Although media literacy educators may explore particular interpretations of the texts of mass media and popular culture (feminist, Marxist, semiotic, critical, or other), they generally "adopt a more student-centered perspective, which begins from young people's existing knowledge and experience of media, rather than from the instructional imperatives of the teacher" (Buckingham, 2004, p. 13).

The idea of using education to promote particular (positive or negative) viewpoints about news, advertising, videogames, the Internet, or entertainment media is a very slippery slope that verges on propaganda. In the opinion of this reviewer, such projects should *not* be considered a form of media literacy education. Readers should ponder for themselves the strengths and limitations of theoretical frames from media effects scholarship that may be applied to the practice of education. Media literacy is not about teaching students what to think; rather, it emphasizes the process of helping people arrive at informed choices that are consistent with their own values through the active, reflective, collaborative, and self-actualizing

practice of reception and production. Communication scholars and educators with interests in journalism, television, film, the Internet and digital media would do well to appreciate the compelling contribution that scholarship in media literacy education is beginning to make using approaches that draw on scholarship across the fields of communication, education, the humanities and social sciences, as well as medicine and public health.

Holding on to outdated views will not enable communication researchers to contribute productively to the robust and trans-disciplinary dialogue about media literacy now occurring in schools, colleges, and nonprofit community centers across the nation. This is why I call for the development of interdisciplinary programs in higher education to more deeply explore the connections between communication, media studies, and education (Hobbs, 2010). We must continue to examine the complex pedagogical practices that support civic engagement, critical and creative thinking, and the broad range of communication competencies that support a lifetime of learning with and about mass media, popular culture, and digital technology.

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