Teaching Media and Information Literacy in the 21st Century

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INTRODUCTION

Multimedia platforms such as blogs, social networks, forums, and video sharing websites have become a key component of communication in the 21st century. Ranging from flash news, popular press, and activism to trends, scandals, and advertising, these platforms have also become a repository of media and information in today's hyper-connected society. Both individuals and media professionals often create, curate, and circulate content (i.e., user-generated content) in digital media spaces, thereby saturating media spaces with images and information that shape our digital culture (Gleason, 2013). Possessing the competencies to understand how information is conveyed through digital media is therefore an important skill to empower citizens to recognize its functions and effects on human communication. To address these objectives, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) developed a media & information literacy (MIL) framework that encompasses the skills needed by 21st century citizens to critically evaluate information communicated through different media sources (UNESCO, 2013). Drawing from the UNESCO MIL framework, this chapter examines the skills needed by individuals to evaluate information presented through digital mass media, and discusses the role that educators can play in its instruction. The next section provides a brief history of MIL, followed by a look at the specific competencies that compose MIL.

Then, the chapter proceeds to discussing the role of educators in MIL instruction and concludes with the implications of MIL implementation in educational settings.

BACKGROUND

What does it mean to be literate in the 21st century? While literacy has traditionally been contained to reading and writing skills, communication in the 21st century has expanded these customary views of literacy into an ever-evolving concept (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). In today's world, unfiltered information is available across multiple media platforms, such as television or newspapers, but more particularly on the Internet. Because media and other information providers are instrumental in shaping the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals in today's digital age (Guzzetti & Lesley, 2015), being literate in today's society therefore includes being able to read, write, and communicate across a range of platforms, tools, and media. As a result, individuals need to master an array of literacy skills beyond basic reading and writing abilities (Livingstone et al., 2014). Citizens who are not aware of how media and information systems function are more likely to accept media messages as facts, while individuals who possess media and information literacy skills are able to evaluate and draw their own conclusion from the constant flow of mediated information (Potter, 2004).

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Media & Information Literacy (MIL) is an umbrella term that bridges information literacy with media literacy. Because the Internet is a digital platform that hosts multitudes of archives of mediatized information, navigating 21st century digital information implies the convergence of different sets of skills to address the challenges of our globalized world. Modern information systems are complex and multifaceted, and require individuals to be informed and engaged citizens in order to make sense of the mediatized information that surrounds them. MIL thus describes the 21st century skills that individuals need to critically evaluate information via various media sources and to become critical consumers of information (UNESCO, 2013). UNESCO (2013) articulated that media and information literate citizens should understand the importance of accessibility to information, know how to evaluate its veracity, and use it in ethical ways. Additionally, they should understand media functions and purposes, and engage with them for self-expression. For instance, individuals should be able to distinguish when media and information are used either for entertainment, decision making, problem solving, learning, or communicating with others. They should also understand how these purposes are related to the roles and the functions that different media play, and that based on these functions, different media adhere to different professional and ethical standards. With this understanding comes the ability to practice one's own digital skills to engage with media and information for personal purposes, such as creating user-generated content, evaluating the credibility of a source, or communicating with others. This conceptual view of MIL is represented in figure 1. below.

The social implication of being media information literate in the 21st century is informed participation in digital communication (Jenkins, 2009; Lee, 2013; UNESCO, 2013). MIL skills allow users to move from being passive consumers of digital information and media to being actively engaged in the information systems that shape their culture (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008).

For example, an informed media and information literate person would recognize and react to media biases when present, would engage in an ethical manner with online social exchanges, or would participate in a digital culture by creating content relevant to that culture. MIL skills not only foster individuals' critical thinking and engagement with contemporary issues, but also allow them to take part in our era's "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2009). A participatory culture allows users to communicate through the creation of content to actively use media to engage audiences (Jenkins, 2009). Therefore, participants who are equipped with MIL skills can help shape today's digital society and draw their own conclusions from the media and information that structures their culture, instead of simply accepting these media messages as unchangeable facts. Hence, possessing MIL skills can further the gap between those who participate in the culture, and those who do not because they have not acquired the necessary analytical and technical skills to do so (Jenkins, 2009).

UNESCO has focused on issues of media literacy since the 1960's, but acknowledged in the early 2000's that technology was changing the role of media in society and that soon, individuals would need to possess new skills to make sense of new types of communication and ways to access information (Frau-Meigs, 2007). In knowledge societies, information includes and depends on the process of communication, and as a result, media literacy and information literacy are intrinsically connected (Lau, 2013). Livingstone et al. (2008) argued that despite their traditionally divergent disciplinary backgrounds, the object of inquiry in both media literacy and information literacy started to be united to understand "the public's understanding of and effective engagement with media, information and communication technologies of all kinds" (p. 2). Koltay (2011) declared that one of the most salient commonalities between media literacy and information literacy was the analytical and critical thinking skills needed to interact with media and information.

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