

## Chapter 8

# Media Literacy Education in the Era of Post–Truth: Paradigm Crisis

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this chapter, the authors use Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions to examine the development of media literacy as a field of study and practice. More specifically, they focus on the current stage of media literacy, which they believe to be model drift that reveals the emerging crisis of the current paradigm based on epistemological assumptions of modernity. The authors look at this stage against the current social background of the era of post-truth and through the prism of ongoing debates between different media (literacy) scholars and educational practitioners. The era of post-truth can be seen as a logical manifestation of postmodernity, when the idea that truth and facts are relative is becoming part of the public discourse. In this period, different scholars and practitioners offer different ideas on what media literacy is and what its import may be. These debates are not new; yet, today they might have more serious consequences, signaling a need to reevaluate the existing paradigm that has formed the foundation of media literacy education since the field’s emergence.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The goal of this chapter is twofold. First, to describe the development of media literacy education (MLE) using Kuhn’s model of scientific revolutions (Kuhn (1996[1962])) and through the prism of major debates that have defined the field throughout the years (see Fig. 1). Second, to use the notion of the paradigm crisis for interpreting the latest big debate about media literacy triggered by statements of danah boyd (2017, 2018), media scholar for Microsoft and founder of the research institute Data & Society. The

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chapter suggests that the field of MLE is in the stage of model crisis, which signifies the impending change of the current paradigm of media literacy based on epistemological assumptions of modernity.

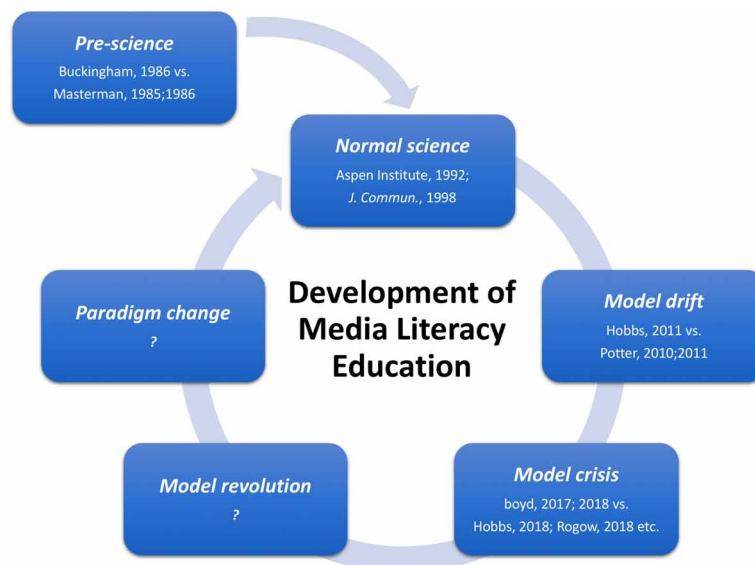
The chapter is structured as follows:

1. Introduction, including a brief description of the era of post-truth and stages of Kuhn’s model, as well as a note on the authors’ subjectivity.
2. Analysis of the *pre-science* and *normal science* stages (according to Kuhn’s model) through:
  - a. a debate between David Buckingham (1986) and Len Masterman (1985; 1986);
  - b. a consensus and disagreements that emerged at the Aspen Institute gathering in 1992 and inside the 1998 special issue of the *Journal of Communication*.
3. Analysis of the *model drift* and *model crisis* stages (according to Kuhn’s model) through:
  - a. a debate between Renee Hobbs (2011a; 2011b) and W. James Potter (2010; 2011);
  - b. a debate between danah boyd (2017, 2018) and several MLE scholars and practitioners (e.g., Doctorow, 2018; Doxtator, 2018; Hobbs, 2017; 2018; Rogow, 2018).

## Post-Truth

Following the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald J. Trump as the president of the United States, Oxford Dictionaries chose “post-truth” as the word of the year 2016. They define the term as “[r]elating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). A while back, philosophers predicted the emergence of a new cultural configuration that would render the term *objective facts* altogether meaningless; they called it postmodernity (Lyotard, 1984[1979]).

*Figure 1. Stages of Kuhn’s model and corresponding MLE debates (Friesem & Friesem, 2019)*



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