


# Chapter 1

## Media Literacy: Some Historical Context

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter sets the foundation of the book by giving a historical overview of media literacy research and education. The chapter looks back at the 1990s and 2000s and the media literacy scholarship that came out during those periods. In many ways, these texts set the standard for media literacy research, as well as media literacy pedagogy and curriculum development. The chapter continues by looking at where media literacy scholarship is today – the challenges seen in students and in media literacy education itself. Americans have access to more information than any other time in human history, but they are also resistant to facts and opinions that challenge their own thoughts. Although there has been much progress in media education, there is also still an extreme need for it.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

I find it hard to believe that almost 30 years have passed since I began studying media literacy. At the time, many of us were very passionate about it and pushed for classes in media literacy and critical thinking about the media we consume every day. Messaris (1994) studied what training was needed versus what was naturally understood when we read media texts. Silverblatt (1995) sought to define the concept of media literacy and develop a framework for becoming more media literate. Zettl (1999) wrote about the role of media aesthetics as a foundational language used in media messages. Hobbs (2007) wrote about the need for media literacy classes in

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high schools, and Potter (1998) wrote textbooks for college classes. They focused on actual skills and training that lead to a more literate media consumer. In many ways, media literacy scholars got their wish. High schools and colleges now train students to think critically about their media habits and consumption. Production classes now exist in high schools across the country where news shows are produced, websites are designed, films are analyzed, and students are taught how to interpret media messages.

But we still have a long way to go. The media are now vastly different than 30 years ago, when the Internet was in its infancy. Our modern media environment is more saturated with competing media messages than ever, and we must re-evaluate our pedagogical approaches to explore the challenges presented in our current post-truth era. The classes in many schools are electives and not required for everyone. Students in production classes often focus on technical skills and button pushing, not the rationale behind the images and sounds. Students in media literacy classes have trouble seeing past the “theory” to understand how their own habits shape the world around them. We also live in a post-truth environment. Thirty years ago, the problem involved searching to find *any* information. Now, we have the entire world’s information literally in our pockets, but we are challenged to dredge through seemingly infinite amounts of bad information to find the good.

Our students are more media savvy than ever. They use cell phones to shoot and edit Tik-Tok videos and post them instantaneously. They have a natural eye for composition and a feel for how to connect with audiences because they’ve grown up in this environment. McLuhan’s (1964) famous line about the technology shaping the message seems to be ever-relevant. Yet, these same students rarely take the time to critically consume the media they seek to produce. The available content clearly resonates with consumers, but is rarely fact-checked. Social media personalities follow. And, personally saddest for me, even though I have students who want to produce broadcast news, they rarely even watch it.

This chapter will look at some historical trends in the way we think about media literacy. It will also provide some of my perspective about our current state of media literacy pedagogy and where we might want to go in the future: how do we teach critical analysis of media to people who are both engulfed by it and unaware of it at the same time? How do we teach production skills to people who grew up with a camera in their hands, yet have trouble differentiating between what they do and what professionals do? I cannot promise definitive answers, but will do my best to illuminate the challenges.

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