

Chapter 6

Boomers Need New Skills: Teaching Modern Media Literacies for the New Media Landscape

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ABSTRACT

Educational opportunities for older adults seeking to understand today's media are necessary. It may be assumed Boomers already know media literacy, but the skills of their youth do not match contemporary citizenry needs. Contrasting the American media landscapes of the 1950s-60s, the 1970s-1990s, and the 2010s-today, this chapter highlights media literacy challenges US Boomers (aged 60 and older) now face. Explanations of varied contemporary pedagogical approaches for teaching about media and algorithmic literacies are introduced, with the Critical Media Literacy perspective being promoted as the broadest and best option to apply to educate this vital population today.

INTRODUCTION

In the U.S., Boomers and their elders (born before 1963) represent about 30% of the population (Neilsberg, 2025). They have enjoyed the benefits of being a demographic “bulge” in the lived experiences of everyone in the United States, have had a significant cultural impact in society, affecting housing, work/occupations, educational institutions, the arts and music scene, fashion, interpersonal relations, and politics, and exert economic and political importance even beyond their numbers. While other media literacy scholars may recognize the attention given to educating school children, teens, and young adults, this chapter recognizes that, unfortunately,

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less attention is given today to instruction and educational opportunities for this age cohort. Elders may be addressed in the news when “scam-prevention” is discussed as a media literacy topic, but otherwise, the broader, more general kinds of literacies which all citizens need are not explicitly taught in ways that target this influential population. It may be assumed that Boomers already know what is necessary, but in fact, the skills learned in their youth do not match the citizenry needs of the contemporary, “AI-enhanced” media landscape.

Therefore, in this chapter, with a discussion of the history of media technologies, media users, and media literacy scholarship, Boomers remain the people of primary interest for the core argument, which relies on the assertion that people educated in the 1960s-early 1970s, and then removed from formal instructional opportunities, will need to learn new things fifty years later. To make the point, explaining why this cohort deserves age-appropriate training, the following chapter identifies the characteristics of the mid/late 20th century American mediated experience, contrasting the media literacy educational goals of that period with the goals of the intervening years, and with a discussion of some media elements that are now “new” and thus need additional, explicit educational attention tailored to this population.

Understanding Generative AI’s current uses and potentials are important for all citizens, and this chapter does not seek to diminish the urgency with which concerned scholars, educators, policymakers, and the general public of all ages should develop better understandings of the ways this new communication technology will have impacts. However, by highlighting the particular demographic of elders, many of whom are eager to learn more about AI, this chapter asserts that this group of Americans could use some targeted help in making sense of what is happening. Admittedly, my interest in elder education is self-serving in two ways: I have been a media professional and then a media scholar and educator for students from middle-school-aged to retirees, and have spent over 40 years working predominantly in higher education. Seeing the many changes in media education goals and perspectives over time has broadened my views about what is taught and what we should be teaching. Furthermore, as is probably obvious for anyone doing math after reading the last sentence, I myself am an American Baby Boomer. My peers in life have maintained keen interests, and many have not stopped engaging with media— they want to know how to access, review, critique, interpret, evaluate, and create media. We elders recognize the ubiquity of mass media and do not, generally, want to be left behind or fooled by the media.

The media technology history and the related media and educational theories of the relevant eras—of Boomer childhoods, the intervening years, and Boomer retirements—are described in detail in the next sections of this chapter and are presented to highlight contrasts between older and more modern media experiences and contemporary life. It is through an understanding of the opportunities, habits,

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