

# Introduction: High Time for “*Dis*-illusioning” Ourselves and Our Media

## Media Literacy in the 21st Century, Part I: Strategies for Schools (K-12 and Higher Education)

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Take care to get what you like, or you will be forced to like what you get.

—George Bernard Shaw

The public is asking for it by not asking for it.

—Mary-Lou Galician

I always begin my media literacy classes and presentations with the two quotations above. My purpose is to ensure that the citizen-consumers I am addressing and activating fully understand precisely *who* holds the ultimate responsibility for the form and content of our mediated news, entertainment, and advertising: *not* the media (although they certainly bear their share of responsibility) and not even the government but, rather, the *consumers* who support these media and who truly determine what we read, listen to, and watch.

If we—as individuals and as a society—want to empower ourselves to use the media rather than having the media use us, if we want to control our media rather than having our media control us, then we must make a serious and long-term commitment to stamping out the *media illiteracy* that is rampant in this nation. Sadly, we have more print and electronic media vehicles and more mediated messages bringing us more information today than ever before, but we are actually *less* informed in many significant ways.

And although many people in the United States believe that they themselves are media savvy, the truth is that they are not. In fact, most U.S. media consumers—even and perhaps especially heavy consumers of media—have not been

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**Guest Editor’s Note:** *Part II of this special double issue devoted to media literacy, which will be mailed to subscribers within a few days of the mailing of Part I, focuses on strategies for the general public.*

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educated to be *media literate*. Thus, we are a third-world country in this vital area. (Canada and the United Kingdom are light years ahead of us.)

In the 21st century, we simply cannot afford the disempowerment of illiteracy. Therefore, it is high time that we make the research, teaching, and practice of *media literacy as a lifelong endeavor* a personal and national priority in our mediated global village.

### A SPECIAL *DOUBLE* ISSUE (PARTS I AND II)

**This special issue is devoted to scholarship and commentary from pioneers and experts in media literacy education in our schools (Part I) and in our lives (Part II).** Because of the unusually large number of important articles from distinguished contributors (all of whom are respected advocates of media literacy across a wide range of disciplines and academic traditions), this special issue had to be published as a *double* issue, with the 24 articles divided into Part I and Part II. Together, these two parts constitute a veritable *textbook* of media literacy education.

The publication of these articles in *American Behavioral Scientist* is particularly apropos: The journal's dynamic interdisciplinary approach and multidisciplinary readership afford an especially apt forum for the discussion of media literacy, which is and must be *transdisciplinary*—cutting across artificial disciplinary boundaries, merging the best approaches and knowledge bases of all fields, and sharing rather than competing to produce the best research and practice.

*Transdisciplinarity.* Transdisciplinarity is also the hallmark of the contributors to this special issue—practitioners, scholars, and educators in diverse fields: education, journalism and mass communication, cultural criticism, media ethics, media economics, reading, psychology, sociology, pediatrics, politics, public health, rhetoric, gender studies, technology studies, and human communication. Despite their different approaches, the author-advocates share the basic concepts of, concerns about, and commitment to media literacy education in our schools and in our lives.

These shared concepts are the bedrock of what media literacy is, as declared on the Web site of the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA; 2004), a national nonprofit membership organization of diverse individuals and organizations (including educators, faith-based groups, health care providers, and citizen and consumer groups) providing national leadership, advocacy, networking, and information exchange:

Media literacy empowers people to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of an increasingly wide range of messages using image, language, and sound. It is the skillful application of literacy skills to media and technology messages. As

communication technologies transform society, they impact our understanding of ourselves, our communities, and our diverse cultures, making media literacy an essential life skill for the 21st century.

Within North America, media literacy is seen to consist of a series of communication competencies, including the ability to ACCESS, ANALYZE, EVALUATE and COMMUNICATE information in a variety of forms including print and non-print messages. Interdisciplinary by nature, media literacy represents a necessary, inevitable and realistic response to the complex, ever-changing electronic environment and communication cornucopia that surrounds us. (paras. 1-2)

The transdisciplinary contributors to the two parts of this special issue make it clear that media literacy education in our schools and in our society is a *democratic imperative*. It should begin as early as possible in children's development and alongside their first media usage.

### THE TIME FOR “*DIS-ILLUSIONING*” OURSELVES AND OUR MEDIA IS NOW

Losing an illusion makes you wiser than finding a truth.

—Ludwig Borne

Despite diverse findings and recommendations of research based in varied methodologies and theoretical frameworks, one conclusion is clear across most studies of the effects of mass media: *The mass media do not merely reflect us; they also greatly influence us* (see, e.g., Bandura, 1969, 1971, 1977, 1986; Galician, 1986a, 1986b; Galician & Vestre, 1987; Gerbner et al., 1986; McLuhan, 1964; McQuail, 2000; Potter, 2001; Silverblatt, 1995; Sparks, 2002). Indeed, the media are a prime and powerful agent of socialization.

Therefore, it is high time to apply critical-thinking skills in our use of them and in our resistance to their undue influence. It is high time for what I have termed “*dis-illusioning*” of ourselves and our media (Galician, 2004). The definition of “*dis-illusion*”—both as a noun and a verb—is “to free or deprive of illusion.” In aid of focusing attention on the need to interrogate and resist the illusions promulgated by the media as well as to eliminate them from our cultural values and personal belief systems, I use this term as a type of synonym for media analysis and criticism. (I hyphenate the word to further focus attention on the process of *moving away from the illusions*.)<sup>1</sup>

However, without training, media consumers of all ages are ill equipped to examine and evaluate mediated illusion. We do not expect children or adults to be able to learn to read “on their own,” but most people naively expect that they should be able to read the varied and complicated texts of media—not only

newspapers, magazines, and books but also popular songs, radio and television, movies, music videos, and the Internet—without any formal instruction.

### “EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION”

The pioneering Center for Media Literacy (CML) (2004)—a nonprofit educational organization that continues to serve as a leading force in the movement—has long advocated a philosophy of “Empowerment through Education” with three intertwining concepts:

1. Media literacy is education for life in a global media world.
2. The heart of media literacy is informed inquiry.
3. Media literacy is an alternative to censoring, boycotting, or blaming “the media” (Educational Philosophy section).

All three points emphasize the positive nature of media literacy education. The first two points have been discussed above. The third point is an important caveat: It situates ultimate responsibility for informed media consumption on media consumers, and it underscores the purpose of media literacy education, which is not to prevent or reduce media usage but rather to use media wisely. For example, I am always amazed by parents who boast that they “don’t allow” their children to watch television or use the Internet. (Of course, these are usually the same parents who think they can “trust Disney”!) “Informed inquiry” requires that children be what I have termed “debriefed” after exposure to Disney’s messages.<sup>2</sup>) I wonder how these parents enforce their prohibition in our 24/7 media environment. Moreover, mass media—including television and the Internet—offer many genuine benefits to children and adults. Instead of imposing a “*quarantine*,” a more enlightened and empowering parental practice would be to provide “*immunization*.”

Appreciation and validation of what is good in the media must be part of the practice of media literacy. As the contributors to this special issue demonstrate, we can be critical *and* constructive—and still enjoy the mass media. The attitude of the media literate citizen-consumer should be skeptical but not cynical. The approach of the journalist and the researcher should be employed: questioning and interrogating media messages without prejudice or preconception about the answers.

At its core, media literacy is a process of inquiry and discovery. However, the issues are complex, so there are no simple answers. In her frequently cited seminal article “The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement,” Renee Hobbs (1998), a contributor to this special issue, raised seven questions central to our Part I focus—the media literacy movement in our schools:

- Should media literacy education aim to protect children and young people from negative media influences?
- Should media production be an essential feature of media literacy education?
- Should media literacy focus on popular culture texts?
- Should media literacy have a more explicit political and/or ideological agenda?
- Should media literacy be focused on school-based K-12 educational environments?
- Should media literacy be taught as a specialist subject or integrated within the context of existing subjects?
- Should media literacy initiatives be supported financially by media organizations?

Looking to the future of “this emerging field of inquiry,” Hobbs exhorted scholars and educators to take action in two ways: (a) increased efforts to reach larger numbers of children and youth in a variety of settings and (b)

theory and research [that] predicts, documents, measures, and evaluates the complex processes of learning and teaching about the media with these important audiences. It is only through the creation of new evidence that will result from these two kinds of action that the “great debates” can ever hope to be resolved. (Issues for the Future section, para. 7)

The articles in Part I of this special issue represent giant steps in responding to that call.

## CONTENT OF PART I OF THIS SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE

I have divided the articles of this special double issue into the following seven major sections:

### *PART I: Strategies for Schools (K-12 and Higher Education)* (Volume 48/Number 1; September 2004)

- Section 1: Essential Issues of Media Literacy Education
- Section 2: Media Literacy for K-12
- Section 3: Media Literacy for Higher Education

### *PART II: Strategies for the General Public* (Volume 48/Number 2; October 2004)

- Section 4: Media Literacy and Health
- Section 5: Media Literacy for Adults in a Democracy
- Section 6: Media Literacy in a Digital Age
- Section 7: Media Literacy in the Future

Although each article stands on its own and provides a unique perspective, each is nevertheless closely related to the others. To facilitate the continuity both within and between the sections, I have presented the articles sequentially, beginning with three “keynotes” by pioneers in the field who offer an overview

and present key issues. (Part II concludes with a final exhortation about theory-based practice by another pioneer.) The sections then progress from media literacy strategies for the youngest consumers in our schools to the related rights and responsibilities of adults in our society—including the nexus of media literacy and public health and the concerns of more recent visual and digital media literacy.

As noted above, Part I focuses on strategies for schools (K-12 and higher education), and Part II focuses on strategies for the general public. Of course, many of the issues, strategies, programs, and recommendations of Part I are applicable to media literacy for the general public as well. Similarly, some of the content of Part II overlaps school-based strategies.

*Section 1: Essential Issues of Media Literacy Education.* For more than 25 years, Elizabeth Thoman—founder of *Media & Values* magazine and the Center for Media Literacy (CML)—has been a leader in the media education movement she pioneered in the United States. It is a genuine honor to have one of our nation’s leading voices for media literacy education sound the keynote for this special issue devoted to that topic. In “Media Literacy—A National Priority for a Changing World,” she and Tessa Jolls, Center for Media Literacy president and CEO, explain why a new paradigm of literacy is vital for democracy in our 21st-century world of converging global media. To be truly empowered in our media culture, children, youth, and adults must master new skills that go beyond merely understanding media messages to the larger goal of developing critical thinking. Thoman and Jolls share specifics from their *CML MediaLit Kit* (Center for Media Literacy, 2003), which provides a comprehensive framework centered on the Center for Media Literacy’s “Five Key Questions That Can Change the World.”

In the second keynote, “Shifting From Media to Literacy: One Opinion on the Challenges of Media Literacy Education,” Faith Rogow—immediate past national president of the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA), an award-winning consultant to PBS (including *Sesame Street*), and a media educator who has trained thousands of teachers, students, child care providers, and parents to understand and harness the power of television—extends the call for a new media literacy paradigm that encompasses critical thinking. She argues that the hallmark of the movement, which should be conceived more as pedagogical than as ideological or political, must be “literacy” rather than “media.” Ultimately, the movement must become a transdisciplinary academic field.

Art Silverblatt, who (with coauthor Ellen M. Enright Eliceiri) literally wrote the dictionary on this subject (*The Dictionary of Media Literacy*, 1997) as well as several trailblazing media literacy textbooks, discusses “Media as Social Institution” in the third keynote commentary. He pinpoints an important paradox: Although the mass media have assumed many functions formerly provided by traditional social institutions (such as the church, school, government, and family), these media systems—whose primary objective is to make a profit—

were never intended to serve as a social institution. Thus, media literacy strategies are vital for the self-protection of consumers who seek direction, purpose, and meaning from the media but are instead confronted with violent and sexual messages geared toward attracting rather than serving audiences.

*Section 2: Media Literacy for K-12.* As noted above, “The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement,” a brilliant landmark essay published in the *Journal of Communication* in 1998 and widely cited (including by many of the experts in this special issue) was written by Renee Hobbs, who directs the Media Education Lab at Temple University as well as the Ph.D. program in Media and Mass Communication. For this issue’s section on media literacy for K-12, she lays the groundwork with “A Review of School-Based Initiatives in Media Literacy Education,” in which she describes several different statewide programs, discusses varied motivations of teachers who implement them, and acknowledges public anxieties about pedagogy and popular culture. In addition, she highlights a crucial media literacy education strategy for teachers: moving from “sage on the stage” to the more effective “guide on the side.”

Cynthia L. Scheibe, executive director of Project Look Sharp—a model initiative at Ithaca College for K-12 teachers and support staff in upstate New York—extends the discussion in “A Deeper Sense of Literacy: Curriculum-Driven Approaches to Media Literacy in the K-12 Classroom.” A developmental psychologist, she argues that the media literacy goals of critical-thinking, communication, and technology skills can be achieved through a unique approach to the teaching of core content across the K-12 curriculum, and she provides specific examples of success in implementing what could be considered a revolutionary practice: “a curriculum-driven approach to media literacy integration.”

Focusing on this type of approach in a specific curriculum, Robert Kubey—director of the Center for Media Studies at Rutgers University—sheds light on the subject in “Media Literacy and the Teaching of Civics and Social Studies at the Dawn of the 21st Century.” Lamenting that “the United States lags behind every other major English-speaking country in the world” in the delivery of media education, he substantiates the critical need for citizens in a media-saturated democracy to be “educated in all forms of contemporary mediated expression” rather than merely print media. He, too, offers specific, detailed examples of successful school programs as well as a variety of useful resources.

The importance of understanding and acknowledging that 21st century “literacy” encompasses far more print media is further underscored by a foremost reading expert, Donna E. Alvermann, distinguished research professor of reading education at the University of Georgia and a past president of the National Reading Conference. “Media, Information Communication Technologies, and Youth Literacies: A Cultural Studies Perspective” offers her views about how new and emerging media technologies (e.g., the Internet, instant messaging, and e-mail) have irrevocably changed the meaning of “reading” and why this

technological revolution necessitates comparable changes in how reading is taught in our hypermedia environment. She explains why critical-reading skills must be developed for all authored “texts”—print, visual, and oral—and she provides some questions for which teachers and students might pursue answers.

Heather L. Hundley, a past chair of the Media Studies Interest Group of the Western States Communication Association, relates a delightful and instructive personal case study in “A College Professor Teaches a Fourth-Grade Media Literacy Unit on Television Commercials: Lessons Learned by the Students—And by the Teacher.” Her ethnographic essay, which emphasizes the import of the two-way communication in any classroom, chronicles her experiences introducing such diverse and seemingly advanced concepts as Aristotle’s techniques of persuasion along with the basics of media aesthetics (ethos, pathos, and logos) to elementary school students whose capstone project at the end of the 4-day “workshop” she offered is the production of a television commercial. She presents her lesson plans along with anecdotal reports and recommendations, as well as some poignant comparisons of these youngsters and her usual classes of college students—a segue to this issue’s next section.

*Section 3: Media Literacy for Higher Education.* A further transition from the previous section to this section comes via commentary of William G. Christ, who chaired the National Communication Association’s task force on K-12 media literacy standards. For this special issue, he turns his attention to college and university students in “Assessment, Media Literacy Standards, and Higher Education.” He asks a series of cogent questions as he first grapples with the difficulty of defining *media literacy*. Then, presenting standards from the national accrediting agency of journalism and mass communication programs in higher education (the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication) and an academic communication association (the National Communication Association), he offers starting points for colleges and universities to develop and document student media literacy.

Before moving to the United States from his native Australia, David M. Considine earned one of his country’s first media education degrees. Now he coordinates “the first graduate program in media literacy in the United States”—at Appalachian State University in rural North Carolina. He also chaired the first National Media Literacy Conference in 1993, and he has served as a media literacy consultant to both the Clinton and second Bush administrations. In his inspiring case study, “‘If You Build It, They Will Come’: Developing a Graduate Program in Media Literacy in a College of Education,” he shares the personal reflections and rationales of some of the more than 50 diverse students from all over the world who have come to his unique program. In addition, he details the history of the program.

Diversity itself is the topic of “Mining the Invisible: Teaching and Learning Media and Diversity” by Linda Holtzman, who coordinates the Media and



Cultural Diversity program at Webster University in St. Louis and whose book on the subject (*Media Messages: What Film, Television, and Popular Music Teach Us About Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, 2000) examines the construction of “the other.” She argues that ironically and tragically, the popular media create invisible norms and “truths” that focus on human differences rather than similarities; thus, “guiding students to see and mine the invisible stories and messages is central to teaching media and diversity.” Her article provides a road map for getting around harmful stereotypes.

In “Reviving Lolita? A Media Literacy Examination of Sexual Portrayals of Girls in Fashion Advertising,” Debra Merskin—a former advertising media director whose “real-world” experience and expertise inform her university teaching and research of sexual portrayals in the media—employs my “Seven-Step *Dis*-illusioning Directions” (a media analysis framework; see Galician, 2004) to focus attention on dangerous “images of preadolescent allure and perversion” that appear not only in three mainstream magazines that appeal to and influence girls but also (and perhaps surprisingly) in the *New York Times*. Her close analysis of four specific advertisements clearly demonstrates why these exploitative marketing messages, which promote “an ideology that sexualizes girls and infantilizes women to control them,” should concern parents and teachers as well as the young and older women (and men) who are the targets of these unhealthy mediated communications.

In 2000, Rutgers University won the U.S. Department of Education Model Program Award for an alcohol prevention campaign based on the research of Linda Costigan Lederman, whose latest book is *Changing the Culture of College Drinking* (with coauthor Lea Stewart). In the concluding article of Part I of this double issue, she and coauthors Joshua B. Lederman (who teaches critical-thinking skills at Emmanuel College) and Robert D. Kully (who is responsible for the inclusion of a basic communication course in critical-thinking skills as a general education requirement in the California State University system) frame their case study, “Believing Is Seeing: The Co-Construction of Everyday Myths in the Media About College Drinking,” in terms of a well-known classical metaphor—Plato’s Allegory of the Cave—to explicate the role of mass communication and experiential learning in the social construction of meaning that does not always result in accurate reflections of reality. Suggesting that media literacy might more appropriately begin “not with critical thinking about mediated images but with the examination of our responses to the media,” the authors make an important distinction that underscores the responsibility of media consumers for their own media consumption. They also illustrate the strong connection between media and public health, which is the focus of the first section of Part II of this double issue.

## PART II: STRATEGIES FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

As the table of contents demonstrates, Part II (Volume 48/Number 2; October 2004) offers 11 additional outstanding articles from leaders in their field, focusing on media literacy as a public health strategy, media literacy for adults in a democracy, and media literacy in a digital age. It concludes with a research-based call by a media literacy pioneer who argues that a new theory must underlie any new vision for the future.

The outstanding scholarship and commentary from the respected experts who contributed the 24 articles of the two parts of this special double issue form a basic textbook for understanding and implementing media literacy education. However, we have only begun. We still have much to study and implement. We welcome *your* advocacy.

## NOTES

1. To help others effect this “dis-illusioning” process, I have developed *The Seven-Step Dis-illusioning Directions* (Galician, 2004, pp. 106-112), a media literacy approach to analysis and criticism of mediated messages and forms, the structures that underlie them, their effects on individuals and social groups, and our active role in using them to empower us rather than enslave us. In addition to the final steps of traditional analysis and criticism, the *Dis-illusioning Directions* add three steps: *Design* (ameliorative reconstruction), *Debriefing* (evaluation of personal impact), and *Dissemination* (commitment to media literacy advocacy).

In this special issue, Debra Merskin employs *The Seven-Step Dis-illusioning Directions* to examine the sexual portrayals of girls in fashion advertising.

2. Parents tend to trust Disney primarily because there is no foul language or overt sexuality and the storylines seem so sweet. While these are important factors in selecting mass media for children, what is ironic is that most parents do not bother to interrogate the insidious messages their children get from Disney’s often mythic and stereotypic presentations and from Disney’s unconscionable embedded sales pitches for collateral products and their hyper-commercialized cross-promotions (for example, with McDonald’s).

I certainly do not advocate preventing children from exposure to Disney. In fact, many Disney messages are positive and healthy. However, after their exposure to irrational Disney ideology and marketing, children should be *debriefed*. I’ve provided sample debriefings elsewhere (Galician, 2004).

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