What a Difference Ten Years Can Make:

Possibilities for the Future of Media Literacy Education

A Keynote Speech for Summer School di Media Education di Corvara

By Renee Hobbs, Temple University, Philadelphia PA USA

July 16, 2011

Ten years ago, the future of media literacy education looked so bright we had to wear shades. In 2000, more than a thousand educators from all over the world attended the Toronto conference, Children, Youth and the Media: Beyond the Millennium. In the United States, the State of Texas had recently included the concepts of "viewing and representing" on the curriculum standards for English language arts in Grades 4 – 12, textbook publishers were taking media literacy seriously, and state education officials were talking in substantive ways about how to include media literacy learning outcomes on state tests (Ward-Barnes, 2010). Here in Italy, university pioneers at the Catholic University of Milan and Sapienza University were cultivating a new generation of teachers and scholars with the passion and the vision needed to make media literacy education a reality in Italy.

Ten years ago, Manuel Castells published *The Internet Galaxy* (2001), exploring the social informatics of information technologies in cultural context, looking at how economic and social forces were shaping the Internet. As the Internet became more central to our lives, we were beginning to become aware of how norms of file sharing, downloading, and self-representation were emerging, slowly, from the practices of young

people and others who were participating in online communities.

Ten years ago, we were also deep in empowerment-protectionist debates about the centralization of ownership in the media industry and the cultural consequences of marketing to children and youth. We were discovering important cultural patterns among the media and technology habits of children and teens across Europe, thanks to groundbreaking work by Sonia Livingstone and Moira Bovill, with their book, *Children and their Changing Media Environment* (2001). In the U.S. the WGBH *Frontline* episode "Merchants of Cool" featured Doug Rushkoff, who persuasively demonstrated how marketers tapped into youth culture and exploited it for commercial gain (Goodman & Dretzin, 2001). When members of the media industry participated in the media literacy education field and saw themselves as stakeholders in it, we argued about the pros and cons of their involvement, recognizing that even as executives in children's media talked about the importance of media literacy as a life skill, they were simultaneously pushing forward slick advertising and marketing campaigns targeting younger and younger children (Kunkel, 2001).

In 2001, literacy educators, scholars and teacher-educators had begun to start writing and thinking about the implications of using popular culture, mass media, news and current events, advertising and the Internet in the K-12 curriculum. With the launch of the online journal, *Reading Online* (1997 – 2005) and then *The Writing Instructor* in 2001, we found new friends in the field of rhetoric and composition, who were addressing the complex process of supporting the development of "active readers, viewers, and listeners capable of identifying the various ideological positions that print and non-print texts afford them" helping people make informed decisions in responding

to and acting upon the varying positions offered by mass media and popular culture (Alsup, 2001, p. 1).

Finally, the growth of the global media literacy community has been increasing over the past ten years. Not only have we been meeting to share ideas and report the results of our research, there is an increase in collaboration as well. MED and the JMLE are creating a special double issue of our respective journals, thanks to leadership by Gianna Cappella at the University of Palermo. Dr. Silke Grafe of the University of Bodum in Germany is working with our team at the Media Education Lab to develop a new instrument to measure teachers' motivations for media literacy. Dr. Rawia Al-Humaidan of the University of Kuwait and I worked collaboratively to bring a media literacy program to an elementary school that helped children dismantle stereotypes of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East.

Recently, in Morocco, the First International Forum on Media and Information Literacy was organized by the Moroccan Ministry of Education, the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), the World Summit on Media for Children Foundation (WSMCF) and other groups. Over 200 participants from forty countries took part in this Forum, including Australia, Bangladesh, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burma, Canada, China, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Italy, Jamaica, Jordan, Kenya, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Oman, Palestine, Pakistan, Philippines, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sudan, Sweden, Thailand, United Kingdom, United States, Yemen, and Morocco. Experts from in a wide range of disciplines were represented, including media, communication and information sciences; media literacy,

information literacy, journalism, ICTs, curriculum development, educational sciences, sociology, economy, international relations, youth media, linguistics, semiotics, family law, institutional law, science and technology, Internet technologies, history, cultural studies, gender studies, and Islamic studies.

Noting that a main obstacle is the current lack of awareness of its empowering capacities, the group recommended that UNESCO dedicate a week as "World Media and Information Literacy Week" to highlight to all stakeholders the value of promoting and pursuing media and information literacy throughout the world. It was proposed that this should be celebrated on June 15 – 21 every year. They also recommend expanding the UNESCO-UNITWIN-UNAoC Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue (a rotating chair position coordinated by faculty at five universities) to include other universities representing all regions of the world.

I'm aware that many in this audience are similarly entranced with both the deep and diverse transdisciplinary roots and global reach of media literacy education. You are aware of and have contributed to the tremendous progress that has been made in the past ten years. In the time remaining for this talk, I'll examine two issues currently at the top of my mind: the rise of digital literacy and how it affects our field and the research agenda needed for the next ten years of scholarly inquiry.

The Rise of Digital Literacy

Today, media literacy educators are beginning to be noticed, like the pretty girl at the party. But we're not being noticed for our ideas about inquiry, critical thinking, or an exploration of the semiotic or ideological messages about mass media and popular culture —it's because we have long emphasized the use of digital media tools for expression and

communication.

In the U.S., elementary and secondary education is big business, spending more than $540 billion each year. More than 4.5 million people are employed in the United States as teachers in elementary, secondary or at the college and university level. The number of computers used for instruction in public elementary and secondary schools has rapidly increased over the past ten years. In 2008, the average public school contained 189 instructional computers, nearly all of them with Internet access. That's about three students per computer (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). A number of elementary and secondary schools are moving to a one-to-one laptop environment, where students have their own computers all throughout the classroom day.

So when local and state governments decided to invest heavily in educational technology, to prepare students for the 21st century, members of the media literacy community were already there, at the head of the line, showing off our innovative examples of the classroom use of film, television, video production and the Internet. At first, the attention was flattering. It was nice to be noticed. After all, as media literacy educators, we recognized that the explosion of new communication technologies were transforming our society, changing the way we understand ourselves and our communities, as well as the way we work, communicate, live, teach and learn.

But some of us were unnerved by the bureaucrats' insistent and single-minded focus on using tools and technology as the center post of instructional practice. Teachers, it seemed, were not part of the equation. Students would engage directly with technology and voila! Learning would occur. Teacher education programs degenerated to little more than quick tutorials on how to use VoiceThread (www.voicethread.com), Blogger

(www.blogger.com), and Twitter (www.twitter.com). Educational leaders like David Warlick discovered success by encouraging school leaders to focus on the mastery of the tools themselves, not on instructional practices for using the tools in the classroom, analyzing the form or content, or creating meaningful dialogue about the rich content available online. Warlick demonstrates topics like data visualization, Internet research and blogging as a tool for learning by presenting at teacher conferences across the United States. Technology exhibitors spend millions of dollars to reach potential buyers, offering slick presentations, elaborate giveaways, prizes and other rewards to attract the interest of technology directors who, cumulatively, received $650 million in federal stimulus funding in 2009 and were encouraged to spend it before September, 2011. For example, the State of Pennsylvania received $25 million and the State of Texas received $60 million (SEDTA, 2011).

At educational technology conferences, new software and hardware tools are presented for sale each year. As to be expected, some are quite innovative and remarkable and others are truly inane. For example, at one technology education conference, I saw for sale a talking robotic parrot—yes, a mechanical bird—that was programmed to teach vocabulary words to children.

Some fear that the U.S. government's vision for educational technology removes teachers from the equation altogether, substituting technology for human beings. Listen carefully to these goals from the new National Educational Technology Plan: (1) that technology will be used as part of an integrated learning system that responds directly to the individual needs of learners; (2) that technology incorporates cost-effective assessments across academic disciplines; (3) enabling integrated data collection systems

for aggregating and mining student learning and financial data; and (4) developing design principles for online learning that "produce content expertise and competencies" that are "as good as conventional instruction in half the time at half the cost." (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. 7). Embedded in these four issues are a focus on administrative needs (data gathering, assessment and the like) and a vision of teaching and learning built upon the transmission model of education, a concept profoundly in opposition to media literacy education which is centered on constructivist learning principles.

As is evident, the term, *digital literacy*, is getting quite a lot of attention in Washington, in Rome, and around the world. But even though nearly all of our television, movies, music and video games and popular culture are now delivered digitally, to Microsoft, digital literacy means learning to use the keyboard and the mouse (Microsoft, 2009). The term digital literacy is generally conceptualized quite narrowly as only as a set of pragmatic skills associated with the workplace and daily life. The U.S. government identifies five types of digital literacy that are emphasized by the U.S. Department of Commerce. Using a computer device, using software applications and the Internet, participating on social networks, and helping protect children from online abuse are core competencies. And of course, who can argue with this? Indeed, people who cannot use a computer are at a significant social disadvantage and miss out on a number of important social benefits in terms of information, education and social life.

In my home city of Philadelphia, thousands of people lack the basic literacy and life skills they need to benefit from the news media as well as computers and social media. But these skills are not solely about the practice of using a computer. They are far broader than that. For example, if you can't read, you can't understand information found

on a newspaper or a website. If you don't value precision, you can't type in a URL correctly to apply for a job or access documents. If you aren't comfortable experimenting, you won't sustain your energy through failure to learn new software tools to create messages. If you aren't a critical reader, you'll mistake an email from a predator as an email from your bank. If you don't understand the economics of the Internet, you'll click on a lot of silly links that bring spam, viruses and worse into your life.

However, people with digital literacy who have very low literacy and other skills can enjoy the pleasures of social media, uploading a photo to Facebook or finding a YouTube video to learn a new dance craze. In fact, the playful use of computers as a tool of entertainment culture is now creating a new kind of digital divide – something akin to a type of knowledge gap, where those with privilege are able to use the Internet as a tool for information, learning, and self-advocacy, while the less-privileged use it as another form of spectatorship, where watching videos, playing games and checking out your friends' Facebook pages is a pleasant form of diversion. Like the knowledge gap, the rich get informationally more wealthy and the poor get diverted from the stresses of everyday life, fed on a diet of online games and vapid entertainment, with sexy celebrities, musicians and athletes to amuse them.

So the stakes are high as we aim to help *all people* develop the knowledge and competencies they need to be 21st century citizens. I'm convinced that a big part of that goal is accomplished through media literacy education. At the heart of my interest in the field of media literacy education are some ideas centered upon an awareness of the constructedness of media messages, which is the key to developing critical consciousness of culture. Mass media, popular culture and digital media shape our sense of personal,

social and political identity. Media representations shape our understanding of (and in fact become our) social reality. What is needed most among all the citizens of the world is a robust set of critical thinking and communication skills that are activated in response to all forms of media messages (print, visual, audio or digital) and including the genres of news, advertising, and entertainment—whether delivered by our presidents or our business leaders or our celebrities or even from our family members and friends. To acquire these competencies, it's important to have the support of teachers who create learning environments where students can discover how interpretation, analysis and meaning-making works through dialogue, discussion, creative self-expression, and the practice of asking critical questions.

Considering the rising dynamic that's bringing digital literacy to the forefront of public discourse, it was quite a coup that I was invited to be able to contribute my plan of action on bring digital and media literacy, thanks to support from the Aspen Institute and the Knight Foundation. In the report, *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action*, I offer a wider vision of digital and media literacy that builds bridges between the priorities of those in the educational technology community and those in media literacy. In my white paper, I explain:

> Today full participation in contemporary culture requires not just consuming messages, but also creating and sharing them. To fulfill the promise of digital citizenship, Americans must acquire multimedia communication skills that include the ability to compose messages using language, graphic design, images, and sound, and know how to use these skills to engage in the civic life of their communities. These competencies

must be developed in formal educational settings, especially in K–12 and higher education, as well as informal settings. The inclusion of digital and media literacy in formal education can be a bridge across digital divides and cultural enclaves, a way to energize learners and make connections across subject areas, and a means for providing more equal opportunities in digital environments. We define digital and media literacy as a constellation of life skills that are necessary for full participation in our media-saturated, information-rich society. These include the ability to do the following:

- *Make responsible choices and access information* by locating and sharing materials and comprehending information and ideas
- *Analyze messages* in a variety of forms by identifying the author, purpose and point of view, and evaluating the quality and credibility of the content
- *Create content* in a variety of forms, making use of language, images, sound, and new digital tools and technologies
- *Reflect* on one's own conduct and communication behavior by applying social responsibility and ethical principles
- *Take social action* by working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, workplace and community, and by participating as a member of a community

These digital and media literacy competencies, which constitute core competencies of citizenship in the digital age, have enormous practical

> value. To be able to apply for jobs online, people need skills to find relevant information. To get relevant health information, people need to be able to distinguish between a marketing ploy for nutritional supplements and solid information based on research evidence. To take advantage of online educational opportunities, people need to have a good understanding of how knowledge is constructed and how it represents reality and articulates a point of view. For people to take social action and truly engage in actual civic activities that improve their communities, they need to feel a sense of empowerment that comes from working collaboratively to solve problems (Hobbs, 2010, p. 3).

For these and other reasons, I do believe that media literacy educators can shape the public agenda when it comes to the use of digital technology in education. This will, of course, depend upon our ability to recognize and exploit the many benefits of participating in a vigorous exchange of ideas, experiences, and expertise, where respectful dialogue enables genuine learning to occur (AMLA, 2001).

Research Priorities for the Future

The future is indeed so bright that sunglasses are required. Ten years ago, if you would have told me that in 2011, more than 50 doctoral dissertations would have the phrase "media literacy" in the title, I would have been shocked. Scholarship in media literacy was just beginning to emerge in the 1990s when the first wave of scholars from the fields of communication, education and public health began to explore the topic in systematic ways. In 2001, Google was a brand new online tool that educators and scholars were just beginning to use to find like-minded others and make sense of the

rapidly growing Internet. Today, more than 2 million web pages are generated with the keyword search "media literacy" and indeed, there is more engaged participation among practitioners and scholars than we ever could have dreamed of in that time, eons ago, it seems, before the rise of social media. In 2001, I could never have imagined that I would author a book for teachers about how copyright law supports digital learning. I never would have predicted that there would be a YouTube for video sharing where my students could post their own creative work. And I would never have predicted that we'd develop a scholarly journal for media literacy education (or that I would be fortunate enough to be a founding co-editor with my colleague Amy Peterson Jensen).

So it's nearly impossible to predict what may be possible for the bright future of the field over the next ten years. Here I offer an informal "wish list" to identify those research issues that I hope will be more or less sorted out by the time that 2021 rolls around. Each of these challenges will require careful, sustained examination by scholars and practitioners, but I'm confident that in ten years, a substantive base of theory and evidence will shed light on these issues and inform the work of practitioners in a variety of settings, especially in the context of K-12 and higher education.

Prove the Obvious: Focus on Learning Outcomes. When you're in the classroom and see the "aha!" moment in the eyes of a student, it's clear: media literacy experiences are transformative. It changes the way you experience media. And that changes the way you see yourself and the world around you. Media literacy educators seek to cultivate in students a deep understanding of the constructedness of media messages and digital technologies, recognizing short- and long-term implications in relation to the political, social, historical, technological and economic contexts in which we live and work.

Through media production experiences, students experience the genuine power that comes from the recognition that one's own words (images, sounds, and multimedia) can change the world in large and small ways. But researchers must develop new theory to explain the power of media literacy education's potential impact on learners. We must probe to develop a better understanding of how to measure the various core competencies of media literacy itself, as they are differentially manifest in our encounters with different types of media genres, forms and tools. We must develop new assessment paradigms using video documentation and other strategies that can replace the outdated testing practices that are now strangling contemporary education. Five hundred dissertations and even more journal articles, books, and websites will be needed by 2021 to accomplish this lofty and ambitious goal.

Figure Out What Works: Focus on Transfer of Learning. If there's one research question that is the *sine qua non* of all education practice, indeed it is the question of how learning transfers from school to home and beyond. I believe that media literacy educators are in near-ideal circumstances to discover the precise conditions under which such transfer of learning occurs, as students take the creative, collaborative and analytic skills that they learn in the classroom and connect it to their everyday life experiences. We are now learning a lot about the experiences that some children and young people are having using digital media, living their lives online. But it will require a range of research methodologies to discover why, for some students, such activity seems to naturally promote critical consciousness and for others it's just another form of inconsequential diversion. We need to know why some types of media literacy assignments are seen as just another set of hoops to jump through, but for others, the same activities inspire an

awakening of intellectual curiosity that engages passion and inspires authentic, pragmatic and meaningful social action. What's needed is a new level of precision in designing, implementing, describing and analyzing student engagement, teacher motivation, instructional practices and learning environments. We must seek to understand more deeply the configuration of the many factors (including matters of the head, heart and spirit) that contribute to the kind of transfer that John Dewey (1916, 1944) conceptualized in examining the fluid relationship between education, communication, ordinary social life and the genuine practice of democracy.

Take Down the Silos: Interdisciplinary Educational Programs. Perhaps by 2012, educators at all levels will take their cue from elementary teachers and teach the whole person, not just the "subject area." As I mentioned earlier, the interdisciplinarity of media literacy education requires us to deepen our respect for epistemological diversity. We can't afford to be elitist about what counts as knowledge. We cannot cling to received wisdom, be it key concepts, ideological claims about power, agency and identity, or hierarchies of method. Each discipline brings a set of powerful ideas that can inform the practice of digital and media literacy education. The value of interdisciplinary collaboration is that it forces us to see the world afresh. Because we come from such a diverse array of disciplinary backgrounds, we can't assume that our colleagues will necessarily understand touchstone phrases or the sometimes dense shorthand language that helps us explain complex ideas.

Of course, intense specialization is required to conduct meaningful research and it is an essential dimension of creating new knowledge. Such specialization, rooted in the theoretical traditions of our disciplines, may encourage us to stay deep inside our

comfortable silos where people speak the same language, are familiar with the same key authors and received wisdom, and have a shared understanding of what counts as knowledge. Conversations that cross the boundaries, bringing together activists, artists, humanists, social scientists, media professionals and educators necessarily force us to be pragmatic, clear about our claims to knowledge, humble about the limitations of our methods, and appreciative of robust critical questions that can unblock our own biases and preconceptions. For these and other reasons, I'm so happy to have been invited to join you in Corvara for your summer school in media literacy.

By 2021, I anticipate a great shaking-up of the disciplines in both K-12 and higher education, both locally and globally, which will result in a flowering of creativity in both practice and scholarship as new forms of digital and media literacy education thrive. Of course, new technologies will continue to blur the personal and the political, the public and the private, the interpersonal and the mass, the formal and the informal. Competencies and skills including reading/viewing comprehension, critical analysis of media texts and media culture, and skills of teamwork and creativity under constraint will continue to trump the mere accumulation of piles and piles of received knowledge. A lot of the shaking-up will occur as the boundaries between school culture and popular culture continue to elide. It's no longer productive to create artificial separation between "academic knowledge" and knowledge as we experience it in the everyday world. That's why I focus so much on using news and current events as opportunities for teaching media literacy. New opportunities for collaboration situated in both authentic, geographically local and interest-driven global communities will enable educational researchers and communication researchers to learn from humanists, technologists,

historians, media professionals, journalists, software programmers, public health scholars, activists, artists and high school teachers, just to name a few. These changes will enable us to examine the in-between spaces where the next decade of discovery and innovation begins.

References

Alsup, J. (2001). "Power and Play in the Classroom: A Discussion About Media Literacy with Donna E. Alvermann." *The Writing Instructor.* Retreived June 30, 2011 from http://www.writinginstructor.com/alvermann.html

Association for Media Literacy Education (2001). Founding Declaration. http://namle.net/2001/06/30/founding-declaration-2001/ (June 30).

Dewey, J. (1916, 1944). *Democracy and education.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Goodman, Barak and Rachel Dretzin, WGBH Frontline. (2001). *The Merchants of Cool*. PBS Online. Airdate: February 27, 2001.

Hobbs, R. (2010). *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action.* Washington D.C.: Aspen Institute. Retrieved June 30, 2011 from http://www.knightcomm.org/digital-and-media-literacy-a-plan-of-action/

Kunkel, D. (2001). Children and television advertising. In D.G. Singer and J.L. Singer (Eds.). *The Handbook of Children and Media* (pp. 375 – 393). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Microsoft (2009). Microsoft Digital Literacy Curriculum. Retrieved on June 30, 2011 from http://www.microsoft.com/about/corporatecitizenship/citizenship/giving/programs/up/digitalliteracy/eng/BasicCurriculum.mspx

National Center for Education Statistics (2010). Digest of Education Statistics: 2010. Washington, D.C. Retrieved on June 30, 2011 from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d10/

State Educational Technology Directors Association, SETDA. (2010). ARRA Investments in Technology, Innovation and K-12 Reform: The Digital Education Funding Cliff. Washington, D.C.

U.S. Department of Education (2010). National Educational Technology Plan: Learning Powered by Technology. Retrieved on June 30, 2011 from http://www.ed.gov/technology/netp-2010

Ward-Barnes, A.K. (2010). Media Literacy in the United States: A Close Look at Texas. Georgia State University. Communications Theses. Paper 58, 2010. http://digitalarchive.gsu.edu/communication_theses/58