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The National Association for Media Literacy Education's  
*Journal of Media Literacy Education* 9 (1), i - iv

Essay

***In Memoriam: Elizabeth Thoman***

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**Elizabeth Thoman**

June 18, 1943 – December 22, 2016

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Elizabeth Thoman was a leading force in the media literacy movement in the United States. She spent her life advocating for media literacy education, helping to advance the growth of the national media literacy movement in the United States. The very existence of the organization that sponsors this journal, the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), is the direct result of her tireless efforts to build a national community for media literacy educators and activists in the United States.

**Formative Years: A Woman of Faith**

As a girl growing up in Nashville, Tennessee, Elizabeth Jeanne Thoman came to appreciate the beauty and the strength of women's religious communities while still in high school. She entered the Congregation of the Humility of Mary in 1964, professing vows in 1966. She graduated with a B.A. from Marycrest College and earned a Masters degree from the University of Southern California, Annenberg School of Communications and also from Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles.

She began her career teaching English at Linehan High School in Marshalltown, Iowa from 1967 -1969 where she developed an interest in communication education. From 1970 - 1975, she served as staff photographer for the Franciscan Communications Center where she helped make short films designed to promote classroom discussion in religious education.

To advance the communications ministry, Liz founded and led the National Sisters Communications Service in Los Angeles from 1975 to 1983. This

network provided professional communication resources for women religious communities nationwide. Communications was seen as the key to changing the traditional public image of nuns and helping people understand and value the sisters' new roles in a variety of ministries. It was through this work that Liz met Norman Lear, a television producer who created “All in the Family,” who sought her advice on a television show that would feature the changing roles of Catholic nuns.

### **Publisher and Community Builder**

Elizabeth Thoman had a vision for a magazine that could inform people about how to live sensibly with media. A tall, vibrant and attractive person, with a direct blue-eyed gaze and a commanding presence, Liz was effective in enrolling others in her ambitious vision. When she founded *Media&Values Magazine* in 1977, it was an extension of a class project that she developed as a student at USC, working under Professor Richard Byrne (Thoman 1977). Liz imagined a magazine that would explore the values questions raised by the transition “from the Industrial Age to the coming Information Age” (Brown, 1991, 45). Working solo and later with a talented editorial team including Jay Davis and Rosalind Silver, the magazine ran for 16 years (63 issues), tackling such issues as media and war, gender stereotypes and racism in the media, media regulation, children and media and more. The magazine featured short articles that translated key ideas from current academic research and communication policy to inform a general readership including parents and teachers (RobbGrieco, 2014).

As circulation of the magazine reached 10,000, Liz was motivated to create Center for Media Literacy in 1989, developing a website and creating curriculum materials including “Beyond Blame: Challenging Violence in the Media,” which offered lesson plans, video clips and readings designed to help students of all ages develop critical thinking skills in responding to media violence (Thoman, 1995).

When Liz attended a Canadian media literacy conference in Guelph, Ontario and a UNESCO sponsored-conference on media education in Toulouse, France in 1989, she was inspired to help coordinate American educators at the national level to advance the development of a media literacy movement. She worked with Charles Firestone of the Aspen Institute to develop the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, which was held in 1992. At this meeting, the definition of media literacy was formally established as the “ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a wide variety of forms” (Aufderheide & Firestone, 1993).

In 1993, Thoman worked with the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) to produce “Catholic Connections to Media Literacy,” the first faith-based media literacy curriculum packages developed for use in Catholic classrooms and parishes, serving a potential market of over seven million students in Catholic education (Iaquinto and Keeler, 2012). After hosting a successful media literacy conference in Los Angeles in 1996, Elizabeth Thoman co-founded the Partnership for Media Education (with Renee Hobbs, Nancy Chase Garcia and Lisa Reisberg) to promote continued professional development in the field by

hosting national conferences to bring the media literacy community together for dialogue, collaboration and networking (Jolls, 2011). In 2001 PME evolved into the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA), which was renamed the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) as the official membership organization for the field (Bordac, 2014) with over 3,500 members as of 2016.

Known as an articulate and passionate speaker, Elizabeth Thoman testified before Congress on television violence in 1995. She was one of 50 media and educational leaders in the U.S. invited by President and Mrs. Clinton to the White House Summit on Children's Television. She keynoted conferences in the US and Canada, including the National Association for Science, Technology and Society, National Catholic Educational Association, Kentucky School Boards Association, the Southern California Psychiatric Society and others.

Elizabeth Thoman was an educator and leader who inspired many to contribute to the media literacy movement. She presented hundreds of media literacy trainings and workshops to educators and parents in more than 25 states. She was frequently asked to comment on issues related to children, media and education, and was interviewed by Bill Moyers for Frontline, *NBC Nightly News*, *National Public Radio*, *CNN*, *Time*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *National Catholic Reporter*, Associated Press, The Today Show, *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal* among others.

Elizabeth Thoman also offered professional development programs in the Los Angeles area and developed the Felton Scholars program, a competitively-selected group of educators who participated in an in-depth professional development program (Center for Media Literacy, 1997). When Thoman discovered the work of Paolo Freire, she developed a conceptualization of media literacy as an *empowerment spiral* that includes the practice of awareness, analysis, reflection and action. This work extended her thinking about media discernment, a term used to refer to “a process of engaging with popular culture that is thoughtful, nuanced, and informed by religious belief” (Iaquinto and Keeler, 2014, 17).

Elizabeth Thoman received a number of awards and recognition for her leading role in media literacy education. In 2003, Thoman received the Daniel J. Kane Lifetime Achievement Award from the University of Dayton, Ohio. In 2006, Liz received the “Leaders in Learning Award” from the National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and Cable in the Classroom in Washington, D.C. to honor a lifetime of leadership in media literacy education. Her alma mater, Marycrest International University, honored her in 1990 with the Henderson Medal in recognition of her outstanding contributions to the field of education.

### **Photography for Creative Expression**

Upon her retirement, Liz continued to develop her skills as a professional photographer by establishing Healing Petals, a collection of unique photographs to stimulate meditation, reflection and prayer in a process that is grounded in feminist spirituality, Buddhist philosophy, Christian theology and holistic health. In 2010, Saint Thomas Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee, commissioned a

collection of her photographs to be installed in each of nearly 300 patient rooms. Elizabeth Thoman was a member of the Congregation of the Humility of Mary, a contemporary religious community which welcomed Liz's mission to bring media literacy to the world. Near the end of her life, as her health declined, she moved back to Iowa to support her religious community and be supported by their love and care.

As an artist, educator, editor, publisher, activist and a woman of faith, Thoman recognized the transformative power of critical questions and helped many people to see media literacy as a form of inquiry that helps people to explore their complex relationship with media, technology and popular culture. As Deidre Langan Morgenthaler wrote on Facebook after learning about her death, "A great loss to the media literacy community but what a legacy she leaves!"

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