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What a Difference Ten Years Can Make: Research Possibilities for the Future of Media Literacy Education

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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). Back then, we were deep in empowerment-protectionist debates about the centralization of ownership in the media industry and the cultural consequences of youth marketing. 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 and 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, 1).

So at the 2001 conference in Austin, Texas, after months and years of planning and discussing, we officially transformed ourselves from a "gang of four" to become a national membership organization, the Alliance for a Media Literacy America (AMLA). At the heart of this mission was a recognition that the explosion of new communication technologies were transforming our society as well as changing the way we understand ourselves and our communities, as well as the way we work, communicate, live, teach and learn. We recognized the many benefits of participating in a vigorous exchange of ideas, experiences, and expertise, where respectful dialogue enables genuine learning to occur. We wanted to replace cynicism with hope, replace passivity with participation, and replace rhetorical attacks with probing discussion (AMLA 2001).

If you would have told me then that in only ten years, more than 50 doctoral dissertations would have the phrase "media literacy" in the title, I would have been shocked. 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 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 de-

velop a scholarly journal for media literacy education (or that I would be fortunate enough to be a founding co-editor with my colleague Amy Petersen Jensen).

So it's nearly impossible to predict what may be possible for the future of the field over the next ten years. In another publication, I have offered up a plan of action for steps to bring digital and media literacy education to all Americans (Hobbs 2010). But 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. They change 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 giant 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." In my keynote address at the NAMLE conference in St. Louis, I explained how 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. 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, the intense specialization of knowledge that is required to conduct meaningful research 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.

By 2021, I anticipate a great shaking-up of the disciplines in both K-12 and higher education, 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 comprehension, critical analysis, teamwork and creativity under constraint will continue to trump the 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. 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.

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