

Available online at www.jmle.org



The National Association for Media Literacy Education's
Journal of Media Literacy Education 6(2), 1 - 2

Introduction to Media Literacy History

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Abstract

Why is it important for us to consider the history of media literacy? Beyond forging connections of the past to the present, exploring the history of the field can deepen intellectual curiosity and understanding for those who work in media literacy education, ignite interest in others, and drive investigation into understanding the relationships of the facets and fundamentals of media literacy from past to present and into the future. The theme of leadership emerges from questions such as: How do people build programs? How does information get disseminated? What were the challenges? Who were the learners? Who were the teachers? What were the tools? The discussions borne from these themes lead to questions about the influence of changes in society and technology over time to media literacy education. Just as our individual experiences shape and define our personal identities, a community's past and present shape how the field sees itself today and shapes a vision for the future.

Keywords: *media literacy, media education, history, archives, symposium*

In this special issue on the History of Media Literacy we look at topics in media literacy education from the past 40 years and also explore future directions for the field. On September 20, 2013, the first-ever Symposium on the Historical Roots of Media Literacy was held at the Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island, where pioneers working in the field of media literacy education joined teachers, librarians, researchers, and community activists to explore the role of history to the field.

Among the questions that emerged were challenging prompts for the media literacy community, including:

- In places where media literacy happens, what difference does it make?
- What has changed in the social, legislative, education realms since the early 1980s? How has that influenced media literacy education?
- What should the media literacy archive look like in 30 years? Who are the people whose work should be archived?
- What is the role of a national organization?
- What are the forces pushing back and limiting growth in the field?

- What is the role of research for the field of media literacy?
- What creates a tipping point in adoption and implementation of media literacy education?

A look at the historical roots of media literacy calls attention to the availability of archives and manuscripts that provide the foundational primary source materials upon which researchers can build upon. At the Symposium, the Elizabeth Thoman Media Literacy Archive at the University of Rhode Island was dedicated. The archive includes the personal and business archives of Elizabeth Thoman, CHM, founder of the Center for Media Literacy (1989-2007), a leading national non-profit organization in the United States since the early 1990s, and editor of *Media & Values* magazine (1977-1993).

The collection includes extensive notes, artifacts, interviews, publicity articles, books and letters including personal notes and program materials from every major conference since UNESCO's first call for universal media literacy education at Grunwald, Germany in 1984. This collection culminates in the founding of the Partnership for Media Education in

1997, which, in turn, birthed the current National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE).

In this special issue, researchers and expert practitioners explore core topics in the history of media literacy in the United States. Michael RobbGrieco's "Why History Matters for Media Literacy Education," traces developments of media literacy concepts over time with an examination of the history of *Media&Values* magazine 1977-1993. Through his analysis of the theoretical frameworks in the magazine and the related historical contexts, RobbGrieco identifies three themes for the media literacy topics covered during this period and leaves us with the suggestion that taking an historical view may facilitate communication across media literacy discourse communities.

Renee Hobbs and David Cooper Moore look at the youth media movement through their study of four youth-produced films made between 1976-1982 at Cinekyd, a for-profit youth media program developed in Philadelphia. Using the private archive of program founder, Robert J. Clark, this article looks at the films both as historical film objects and as evidence of learning experiences. Youth media practices have a rich history with past programs serving as a model for many of today's programs, and in this article Hobbs and Moore explore the important role of youth-adult mentor relationships in the creation of youth media.

Yonty Friesem, Diane Quaglia Beltran and Ed Crane introduce us to the extraordinary 1972 Media Now curriculum project, charting its historical and educational roots of the 1960s, to its integrative curriculum design, training efforts, federal funding, and program evaluation. Working closely with the last complete curriculum kit available, from the Elizabeth Thoman Archive, authors suggest that the innovative curriculum from the 1970s can be an inspiration for contemporary curriculum development.

In "Teaching About Propaganda," Hobbs and McGee explore contemporary and historical instructional techniques used to teach propaganda with a review of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis' seven propaganda techniques and the lesser-known ABC's of Propaganda Analysis. Their examination of approaches to teaching about propaganda resonate with the concepts of social epistemology, crowdsourcing and social media networks.

Regarding the historical changes in teaching media literacy, Tessa Jolls and Carolyn Wilson explore the evolution of defining the core concepts of media literacy. Focusing on the work of Len Masterman, this paper explores the development and the application of the core concepts of media literacy in Canada, Britain,

and in the United States. While work remains to integrate critical media analysis skills into the Common Core curriculum standards, the authors point to successful initiatives of the European Union and Australia, and by UNESCO to promote media literacy.

Alan Levitt and Bill Denniston describe efforts to raise the visibility and appreciation of media literacy within various U.S. Federal government agencies responsible for substance abuse prevention in the 1990s. The programs and experiences they share can inform possible directions for media literacy to play a greater role in future strategies, priorities, and programs related to substance abuse prevention among youth. The article also discusses some of the inherent challenges and obstacles that impacted the ability to expand these efforts on a federal level.

Renee Cherow-O'Leary takes us inside the development of the Creating Critical Viewers media literacy curriculum, which Cherow-O'Leary implemented under the aegis of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences beginning in 1995.

Stephanie Viens takes a brief look at the work of Daniel Boorstin, whose groundbreaking 1962 book, *The Image*, introduced the importance of examining the "menace of unreality" resulting from the rise of an image culture. Viens considers some parallels between Boorstin's work and that of contemporary media literacy theorist, Douglas Rushkoff.

Finally, Julie Smith reviews *The Teacher's Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World* by Cyndy Scheibe and Faith Rogow. Smith's review describes the inquiry-based approach to media literacy curriculum developed by the authors, which is presented in an accessible handbook style and filled with supporting materials including assessment strategies.

The historical legacy of the field of media literacy is rich, and there is much to be learned from exploring our history, which may strengthen the foundations of the field and inform future work. In future issues, we look forward to learning from scholars around the world who explore the global history of media literacy advanced by practitioners from around the world. In curating this special issue, I build on the work of those who have taught, published, and shared their work before me. As a research librarian, I champion the role of conversation between researchers and practitioners through their scholarship, literature, archives, and teaching. I hope that this special issue leaves you asking questions as well, and hope that you will continue the historical conversation in your communities and in the future issues of JMLE.