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## ***MEDIA RESOURCE REVIEW*** ***Crash Course in Media Literacy***

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*Insighters Education*

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Crash Course (2018). *Crash Course in Media Literacy*. 12 part video series.  
YouTube. <https://bit.ly/2ImGMmD>



### Preview

- Episode 1: Introduction to Media Literacy
- Episode 2: History of Media Literacy, Part 1
- Episode 3: History of Media Lit, Part 2
- Episode 4: Media & the Mind:
- Episode 5: Media & Money
- Episode 6: Influence & Persuasion
- Episode 7: Online Persuasion
- Episode 8: Media Ownership

- Episode 9: Media Policy and You
- Episode 10: The Dark(er) Side of Media
- Episode 11: Media Skills
- Episode 12: Future Literacies

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Forced by its format to distill a subject area's central tenets into just a few sessions, a "crash course" should be an excellent place to uncover the essential elements of a topic or field. Viewed through that lens, Complexly's YouTube offering, [Crash Course in Media Literacy](#) provides an illuminating, if sometimes confounding opportunity for reflection. Complexly is the education-focused video production company founded by bestselling author John Green and his brother Hank Green. The company's foray into media literacy is part of their Crash Course series, a free YouTube channel with more than eight million subscribers.

Posted in February of 2018, the *Crash Course in Media Literacy* has a dozen free video episodes and a short preview, all about nine to twelve minutes in length.

Cultural commentator Jay Smooth serves as series host and instructor. Sitting at an anchor desk and speaking directly to the camera, Smooth is aided by abundant graphics and animated segments. This construct provides for an entertaining version of a fairly traditional, if illustrated, didactic college lecture.

The tone of the fast-paced sessions is casual and slightly irreverent. If views are a measure of success, then this effort is a hit – maybe not a game-winning hit, but a hit none the less. As of March 2019, Episode 1, “Introduction to Media Literacy” has been viewed more than 267,000 times and liked by more than 7,000. The “Preview” was the next most popular, garnering more than 183,000 views. Viewership drops by half or more for the remaining episodes, but that is still impressive reach for a field that is often marginalized, especially in the U.S.

Those who view all twelve videos will encounter a series of entertaining, introductory level explanations of a wide range of media literacy concepts. The course covers psychological processes like confirmation bias and filter bubbles; it provides historical descriptions of topics such as yellow journalism, propaganda, and even the field of media literacy itself; it explains facets of media like constructedness, market research and data collection, public relations and advertising. The series reviews digital literacy topics like catfishing, geolocation, and privacy and looks at political and legal debates over issues like copyright and net neutrality.

These topics are interspersed with overviews of selected mass communications theorists (e.g., Marshall McLuhan, Stuart Hall, and Edward Bernays). Also included are a few quotes from familiar media literacy scholars, including Renee Hobbs and David Buckingham, along with one class devoted to media literacy inquiry skills. The *Crash Course in Media Literacy* video series provides viewers with abundant novice-level opportunities to examine aspects of media that often go unnoticed. What viewers won’t get is a consistent, useful framework for media literacy, the chance to practice and apply the knowledge and skills introduced, or prompts for metacognitive reflection on their own biases and world views.

## OVERALL APPROACH

What impression of media literacy does the course create for the tens of thousands of people it has reached? The preview starts out predictably, with the definition of media literacy currently used by NAMLE: “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication.” But the series doesn’t revisit that definition until Episode #11, entitled “Media Skills.” A person who dove directly into the first class without ever watching the preview wouldn’t understand that inquiry is central to being media literate.

Lacking that context, a student sitting in on the first couple of sessions, could (erroneously) assume that studying Mass Communications and studying media literacy are the exactly same thing. The voices of educators are missing because this is not a course about media literacy *education*.

The Preview video also poses a telling first question: “How do I know if a piece of media is trying to manipulate me?” And it provides an answer: “It probably

is.” In other words, the *Crash Course in Media Literacy*’s central assumption is that media are inherently manipulative and the primary purpose of becoming media literate is to be one of the “cool, in-the-know” people who isn’t fooled. Making media is tangential. Developing the discipline of reflecting on one’s media choices or interpretations is almost entirely absent.

### **Media-As-Problem Paradigm**

The Course’s big-bad-media framework is common...and unfortunate. What’s particularly frustrating in this instance is that the *Crash Course in Media Literacy* explicitly disavows the belief that media are a monolith (“Media and Money,” Episode #5) or that media are uniformly negative. Course creators seem oddly unaware that the entire series uses a media-as-problem paradigm.

It starts in the “Introduction to Media Literacy,” Episode #1, which features a defense of the course’s use of the phrase “*the media*” as a singular noun to mean “mass communication.” Though the explanation is welcome, the choice is not without consequence. Even if we accept that in colloquial use the word “media” can be treated as a singular, the result obscures the diversity of media. When media are perceived as a single entity, if you can prove that one media outlet is untrustworthy, then all media are equally untrustworthy. And if that’s the case, why bother learning to apply analysis or discernment skills, i.e., why bother with media literacy at all?

The Course’s claim to be based in literacy (“History of Media Literacy, Part 1,” Episode #2), is equally incongruous. Literacy is a social meaning-making process in which we use language to make sense of the world and to express our thoughts and feelings (Harste, 2003). In the modern world, that has typically meant learning to comprehend, interpret, and use the written (or printed) word. Media literacy expands this traditional literacy construction to include mediated image- and audio-based communication. Media literate people apply their skills to *all* symbol-based communication, irrespective of message.

In contrast, many episodes in the *Crash Course in Media Literacy* dwell on looking at negative aspects of media and suggest that media literacy is the counterbalance. Even the episode entitled “Media and the Mind” (Episode #4) positions media literacy as a way to “overcome the worst impulses of [our] brains.” It labels the human attraction to narrative as a weakness, noting that “the human instinct for storytelling is straight up dangerous for media literacy,” all while it uses storytelling to offer some brilliant explanations of key concepts.

For example, storytelling is used to great effect in “Media Policy and You” (Episode #9) which does a nice job of explaining fair use using a narrative about an imaginary viewer who wants to make their own video to a popular Taylor Swift song. Smooth walks viewers through a helpful four-question process that they can use to determine whether particular aspects of making this video fall within accepted fair use practices.

In the *Crash Course in Media Literacy*, media literacy is an individual pursuit with individual benefits. This approach shows up most profoundly in “Media Skills,” (Episode #11) when Smooth explains the meaning of each aspect of media literacy’s definition. The examples provided for “Act” include researching

candidates before you vote, responding to information you read by becoming vegan, and deleting Twitter because you spend too much time on social media. But these examples shortchange the fundamentally democratic forms of action that this particular competency emphasizes. There is never a suggestion that one might join with allies to push back on problematic media structures, engage in online grassroots organizing, create interest-based online communities, or connect with others by sharing work in a blog or YouTube video. That's a significant, if common, missed opportunity given that one of the primary changes from our analog past to our digital present is the ability to easily connect with others across the globe.

## Highlights

To be sure, the *Crash Course in Media Literacy* features some great segments. Some are apparent right at the start. For example, Episode #1's rejection of textual determinism and its subsequent imaginary texting conversation using only emojis to arrange a possible romantic encounter is a creative and effective way to demonstrate Stuart Hall's notion of encoding and decoding (i.e., communication is a complex interaction between maker and consumer).

"History of Media Lit Part 2," Episode #3 offers a cleverly-imagined scenario of sharing mom's birthday on Facebook to people who otherwise wouldn't know (or care) about your mother's special day. Smooth points out that this is an example of how a platform has changed behaviors – not just *what* people say, but how they say it and to whom. The episode effectively uses the scenario as a way to demystify McLuhan's declaration that "We shape our tools and then our tools shape us."

Similarly, in "Influence and Persuasion," Episode #6, which is arguably the series' most successful video, Maslow's hierarchy of needs is used to show how ads play on human desires. It nicely illustrates the appeal of feeling loved or validated using an ad from cosmetic company L'Oreal and its slogan "Because you're worth it." In "Online Persuasion," Episode #7 offers a very good description of how the Internet facilitates tracking, and how this has changed advertising from broad to targeted. It follows up with a revealing look at Instagram's terms of service, and ends with the insight that recommendations based on our online history are not really *our* preferences. Instead they are the choices of advertisers, social media platforms, and ISPs – and they can limit the options we see.

Several of the sessions pose high quality, thought-provoking questions. For example in "History of Media Literacy, Part 1" (Episode #2), Smooth recounts news reporting on the 1898 sinking of the Maine and its influence on the U.S. going to war against Spain. He follows with questions including, "What happens when we rely on media?" "Should everyone have access to it?" and "What happens if that access is exploited?"

Finally, "Media and Money" (Episode #5) offers an easy-to-follow yet sophisticated discussion of representation and media ownership. Smooth deftly connects the common use of stereotypes to commercial media systems being rigged to favor those who already have money, all while making clear that the system isn't a conspiracy.

## Limitations and Omissions

Perhaps I should have anticipated inconsistencies from the very beginning, when in Episode #1, NAMLE is misidentified as the National Association of Media Literacy Educators instead of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. Such small sloppiness forces the question: If you get the simple stuff wrong, what else are you getting wrong?

The nod to NAMLE without mentioning any other media literacy organization also reveals that the *Crash Course in Media Literacy* is U.S.-centric. Its American lens influences the content of several discussions. For example, “History of Media Literacy, Part 2” Episode #3 explains the cyclical nature of moral panics over new technologies, but without any of the socioeconomic class analysis common to British scholarship (e.g., [David Buckingham](#), 2012). So the viewer gets the impression that panics are about individual fear of change, not that panics are about a dominant class attempting to impose its values on those it deems to be inferior.

This episode also includes a reference to the average person spending 10 hours a day looking at a screen, but there is no source given for that statistic. This presents an interesting format dilemma. Unlike print sources, YouTube videos don’t typically offer citations or bibliographies, so there is no way to check sources. So the same course that challenges viewers to spot and reject disinformation (“The Dark(er) Side of Media,” Episode #10) makes it difficult to fact-check its own claims. Perhaps that’s because the course creators can only envision analyzing media that is objectionable, and they see themselves as “good guys.”

In fact, it isn’t even clear who is responsible for the content of *Crash Course in Media Literacy*. Monica Bulger, who has written about media literacy (including in this journal) is listed as the education consultant, but not the writer. Aubrey Nagle, a Complexly staffer (and not a media literacy specialist) is given the writer credit. It’s reasonable to assume that as host of the series, Smooth is also responsible for some of the content, but without knowing who is responsible for particular choices or approaches it is difficult for a reviewer to assess influences. That’s a conundrum for a media literacy course, where learning to evaluate source credibility is a central goal.

Unfortunately, there are also a few videos that include errors. The session on propaganda quotes Renee Hobbs, noting, “Everyone has become a propagandist,” but it completely misses her point. While Hobbs would agree with the *Crash Course in Media Literacy* that propaganda is a form of media that uses emotional persuasion to influence political outcomes, she is clear that it can be positive social force as well as a negative one (Hobbs, 2018). The episode, on the other hand, defines propaganda as exclusively negative, even titling the video “The Dark(er) Side of Media.”

Also troubling is Episode #3’s review of the history of media literacy, which describes a linear progression from protectionism to inquiry. It concludes that, “Instead of protecting consumers from media messages, media literacy now seeks to prepare them to receive and create them.” While many media literacy education advocates would be pleased by the notion that protectionism is passé, it’s not true. It would have been more accurate to acknowledge that there are currently

practitioners taking both protectionist and inquiry-based approaches, with calls to limit screen time and observe Screen Free Week (e.g., Jean Twenge, the Coalition for a Commercial Free Childhood, Sue Palmer, Arik Sigman) co-existing with organizations like NAMLE, Project Look Sharp, Media Smarts, the Media Education Lab, and the many schools that celebrate Media Literacy Week with special events and activities. Because Episode #3 is also the video that introduces Marshall McLuhan's work, this episode too important to skip. So educators considering whether to recommend or incorporate the *Crash Course in Media Literacy* are faced with a series of difficult choices.

There are several other episodes that present essential information but that also include questionable content. Ironically, one of the most disappointing episodes is "Media Skills," Episode #11, the one that explores the definition of media literacy and introduces key questions. Why? The key questions that Smooth presents have some serious flaws and omissions. For example, the first question identified is this: "Who created this message and what is its purpose?" The fact that "purpose" is singular closes out the possibility that there could be more than one purpose. And, as the "Media and Money" Episode #5 points out, "Every piece of media has many purposes." A plural form of the question – e.g., Who created this and why? – would have better prompted complex critical thinking and more accurately reflected the course content.

If "key questions" are trailheads that put people on "insight pathways," then it should be reasonable to expect that Episode #11 would offer questions that help viewer-students analyze media in ways that would address the major topics covered in the Course, but that's not what we get. Smooth introduces the [five key questions](#) that Renee Hobbs uses to explore authorship, purpose, constructedness, point of view, and interpretation. But there is no recognition that this particular question set is but one of many possibilities, or that it omits questions that are central to critical media literacy or information literacy approaches, such as questions about benefits and harms, authority, or credibility. This is surprising given the Course's focus on the pitfalls of media and its attention to topics like Russian disinformation campaigns (a focus of the "Dark(er) Side," Episode #10). It is however, indicative of the disconnectedness that pervades the course. It's as if segments were crafted by different people who didn't consider the implications of what the others had said.

It is perhaps, then, predictable that there are no questions inviting epistemological reflection, e.g., "How do my prior experiences and beliefs shape my interpretation?" or "What do I learn about myself from my interpretation or reaction?" or even the simple "How does this make me feel?" (Rogow and Scheibe 2017). The fast-paced format of the course is simply not well-suited to reflection. Some things go by so quickly one might miss them even if they were in pause-the-video-and-ponder mode. In one stunning example, "History of Media Lit, Part 2" Episode #3 offhandedly refers to "social conventions like race and gender," as if most people know or understand that race is a "social convention." The assertion is accurate, but it needs further explanation. I envision lots of people scratching their heads and saying "Wait. What? Race isn't biological?"

When it comes to reflection and self-awareness, the Crash Course in Media Literacy shows its deficiencies. There is only one time when the authors invite viewers to reflect on the Crash Course in Media Literacy itself as a media text. In “Online Persuasion” Episode #7, Smooth briefly references ads that YouTube places around the Course videos and how they’re based on what YouTube knows about you. But that same class also informs viewers that, “When something is free, you’re the product.” While that is certainly true for commercial media, it isn’t always true. What about open source journals (like this one!) for example? And the Course misses opportunities to invite analysis of its set or opening credits, or Smooth’s repeated good natured references to *Titanic* being the best movie ever, or what viewers might learn from the YouTube comments threads that accompany each video.

The Course’s final episode, “Future Literacies” Episode #12, is particularly confusing. It turns towards the future to ponder how our increasingly online lives influence the skills we need to be media literate, suggesting we add two new literacies: data and algorithmic. While the need to understand platform design and data collection and distribution is incontrovertible, it is unclear why the *Crash Course in Media Literacy* felt the need to designate data and algorithms as separate from, rather than part of media literacy, or why the task is posed as something for the future rather than offering viewers strategies that they could use right now.

Despite this anti-climactic ending, there is much of value in the *Crash Course in Media Literacy*. In just over two hours of engaging screen time, viewer-students will increase their awareness of media constructs and ways that media influence our thinking. And they’ll be primed to think about their own media-related choices. Media literacy veterans aren’t likely to gain new insights, but they may find useful examples to support their teaching. However, if you’re considering assigning or recommending this, you’ll want to carefully pick and choose your moments.

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