As I see it, an important challenge for media literacy education in the next decade will be to cultivate a commanding voice in the cultural conversation about new and emerging communication media. To really have a stake in the social, economic and educational developments that emerge around new digital media in the U.S. and globally, media literacy educators need to be part of that larger conversation. Put another way, media literacy education is obligated to harness the technological imaginary and steer it in a productive direction. The technological imaginary consists of the myths, attitudes and values that a culture attaches to new technologies, sometimes in terms of their perceived abilities to fix what’s wrong with society, and sometimes in terms of their perceived destruction of social cohesion (Lister et al. 2003). A less polemic view is that the technological imaginary is a cultural space for negotiating social issues (Marvin 1988). In other words, any number of concerns—about youth development, about the state of Democracy, about the direction of the economy, etc.—can be framed within a discussion about new technologies as cause, antidote or relevant player. Media literacy educators ought to be well-equipped and outspoken in the public negotiation of social and cultural issues attached to new and emerging media in the realms of education, commerce, information and policy. A widespread public influence can be achieved if media literacy educators set their focus in two areas: 1) emphasizing analysis of media technologies along with media content since the forms themselves shape not only content but also the very ways in which we organize our lives, and 2) understanding that the changes in media and communication rapidly taking place right now are part of a historic continuum of change and should be seen in that larger context.

The current technological imaginary surrounding digital media is evident not only in fictional narratives about powerful media and technologies found in television and film (Eagle Eye, Wag the Dog) or advertising (ads for the Droid or the iPhone), but also in the discourses of those politicians, policy makers, educators, and employees within the traditional media industries who tend to focus on the ways in which emerging digital media practices via social networking and the Internet are undermining democracy, journalism, commerce, the needs and future abilities of children and youth, and so on. There is no doubt that purely fear-based dystopian and rosy utopian strands of the technological imaginary are simplistic, and almost never comprehensive or historically-based. But because communication technologies are so rapidly developing right now it seems reasonable that one-dimensional visions of future social interaction, of daily living, and of our vulnerabilities have surfaced in relation to digital communication. So media literacy educators must try to shape the technological imaginary in a reasoned, informed and very public way.

Analyzing Media Form and Content

The first line of focus should be emphasizing the need to analyse media forms and media content. I see movement away from purely content or message-based media literacy to a fuller understanding of the way media forms shape content and also shape the organization of our lives. For example, when cultivating a critical understanding of the ways in which advertising operates within the social sphere, obviously media literacy education must teach critical awareness of the pecuniary logic and methods of persuasion in advertising as a whole and within specific ad messages. It’s also important to look at who is crafting the message and for whom. But it’s every bit as important to look at the way a visual message differs from a text-based message, or how sound operates very differently as persuasion from the visual or textual. Furthermore, it is vital that advertising analysis take into account the kind of consumption environment that emerges when new frontiers of lived existence are tapped by advertisers who can reach
us at all times, and ever-more personally, via our mobile
digital devices, often physically tracking us, targeting
persuasive messages we’re less and less able to escape.

It’s the same with news. Media literacy edu-
cators must cultivate a critical understanding of the
vast differences between visual and sound-based news
on TV versus print-based news in newspapers, versus
hyper-text news online that combines several forms at
once while demanding greater interactivity. The emerg-
ing news literacy movement—populated by many who
have a stake in defending traditional print and broad-
cast news outlets—tends to hone in on teaching young
people to understand the difference between facts from
reliable news outlets (trained journalists) and opin-
ion found on the Internet. While this is one important
component in critically confronting the genre, by itself
it’s too narrow. Digital media are changing the very
definition of news, not just who is gathering and dis-
seminating it. A wider recognition of news content and
news form creates a larger, more relevant, discussion,
and could facilitate folding the news literacy movement
into the larger media literacy movement, making both
stronger.

**Historic Context of Media Development**

The second line of focus for media literacy edu-
cators is cultivating an historic understanding of media
development. Armed with an understanding of how
the penny press newspapers, the telephone, photogra-
phy, film, and radio waves of the nineteenth century,
and television in the twentieth century, emerged and
created some of the same public concerns and celebra-
tions we confront today can help media literacy edu-
cators put current anxieties and attitudes into historic
perspective. All of the aforementioned emerging media
forms changed the genres and practices of their time be-
cause they created new ways to shape, disseminate and
understand messages. And none of them emerged in a
vacuum, outside the larger contexts of the economic,
political and social exigencies of their day.

Take news, for example. Until mass production
of newspapers met widespread urban development of
the early nineteenth century Industrial Revolution and
the necessity of advertiser underwriting, most news-
papers were one person operations. News itself was
a compilation of that person’s subjective rendering of
events and issues combined with other snippets of in-
formation. No doubt newspapers were powerful (the
American Revolution owes a major debt to the early
press), but the definition of news as “facts” and the idea
of objective reporting by trained journalists developed
much later, in the mid-nineteenth and into the twenti-
th century. Fast forward to early radio news, which
caused a panic within the newspaper industry because
of real-time news reporting, then television news,
starting in the 1950s and 1960s, where the combination
of the visual medium and eventually satellite technol-
gy and the cable industry introduced a definition of
news as that which is visually varied and dramatic (and
necessarily produced around the clock). Each new me-
dium ushered in a new era of journalism, requiring new
ways of not only gathering and disseminating news, but
also a re-thinking the very definition of news. We’re
experiencing another major journalistic shift right now.

**Taking On the Technological Imaginary**

The rapid switch to more digital, interactive
media will drive media literacy education in the next
decades because these emerging media allow greater
participation and deeper interactivity. All of this has
captured the attention of policy makers, educators and,
of course, the media industry, and much of it is reaction-
ary. The technological imaginary could completely run
wild unless reigned in by media literacy educators who
understand a larger context of media development, who
can teach critical analysis of form and content, and can
reach their educational constituents and a wider public.
Media literacy educators need to look at the new shapes
of commerce, education, and work and social life to see
where they must not only shift their attention but also
take a leadership position. I suggest that media literacy
take its place on the public stage.

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