

Why does the U.S. lack a media literacy focus in public education?

By Ben Liu

“Media Literacy Matters”

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Our lives are dominated by the media. They influence all aspects of our lives such as telling us how to dress, eat, what to believe, and how we are supposed to behave. People are influenced by multiple forms of media starting at a very young age. Cell phones, television, Internet, and advertising are among the many forms of media influence.

According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, the average child in the United States spends more than 7.5 hours a day, watching TV or movies, using cell phones or computers, and playing video games (KFF, 2010). It is estimated that on average, a child will see around 40,000 ads on television (KFF, 2004).

Most of the advertisements targeted at children promote foods such as candy, soda and snacks (KFF, 2004). Research conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that children between 8 and 12 years of age are exposed to an average of 21 food ads a day, which equals to about 7,600 ads a year. Teenagers are exposed to an average of 17 food ads a year, which equals to about 6,000 ads a year. Among all food ads targeting children and teenagers, 34 percent focuses on taste appeal (KFF, 2007).

This is problematic because the number of obese children and teens in the United States tripled over the past 30 years (CDC, 2011). Researchers argue that food advertisements contribute to unhealthy food choices and weight gain and to the misconceptions about the health benefits of certain foods (KFF, 2004).

In ["Why Media Literacy Matters – Obesity in America"](#), I discussed how media literacy programs can be implemented to help fight obesity.

Health is just one of many concerns regarding media influence.

While the media does have a powerful influence, people can take charge of their lives by understanding how the media works and knowing how they are affected.

Some might wonder if the media has become a source of propaganda. Proponents will argue about the merits of media and technology.

There are truths to both sides but it is important realize that the media does impact our daily lives in negative ways. Several years ago, I discussed how the [media perpetuates stereotypes in society](#). I also wrote several articles about the importance of ethics in journalism. [Quality Journalism. Journalism and Ethics, Pt 1. Part 2.](#)

The media has the ability to influence and change how we perceive the world.

On July 23, I reminded people on Facebook and Twitter about the importance of fact checking. People need to check their sources before they post something on social media.

Back in 2012, after Hurricane Sandy hit, [I wrote about why people needed to be extra careful about what they share on Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites](#). Especially during times of crises as false information can cause panic. I wrote:

It is easy to spread false information on social media. One might think that they are doing something good and helping people by sharing information. While that individual might have good intentions, this accident only harms the public.

Remember the importance of fact checking. Check your sources before you post. Some sites resemble news but they are satire. There have been several posts today that stirred up unnecessary commotion and fear. Check your sources, double check if necessary! This is the importance of media literacy.

[Earlier this week, Miami Herald reporter Christina Viega, wrote about how teenagers could text and tweet but probably could not choose reliable sources from their search results.](#)

This is a problem that needs to be resolved and media literacy education is the answer. It will empower people by giving them the ability to make their own decisions.

Many countries around the world have media literacy as part of their primary and secondary education system.

In Canada, there is an annual media literacy event called [“Media Literacy Week”](#) that takes place in November. The event, co-led by MediaSmarts and the Canadian Teacher’s Federation focuses on the importance of media literacy in education. Other countries such as Sweden, Finland, and the United Kingdom have some sort of media literacy education.

According to the publication, “Media Education in Four EU Countries: Common Problems and Possible Solutions”, research shows that between 70 and 80 percent of students receive some sort of media training in primary and secondary schools (Kennisnet Foundation, 2013).

Why is there a lack of focus on media literacy in the United States?

One of the problems is that many people assume since they (both adults and children) already know how to use digital technology, they do not need instruction on how to use social media resources. They are “digital natives” after all.

Common Core is a start and I discuss the merits in [“Media literacy and Common Core Standards”](#) but it is not enough to fix the problem. Students are not going to develop critical thinking skills overnight. Simply having the standards does not mean students will be capable of applying them and critically analyzing information.

There needs to be more emphasize on helping students learn to analyze information and think critically by making connections to prior knowledge.

Media literacy education is a great example of why the constructivist learning theory is effective as it shows students that learning and having fun do not have to be separate. It gives them a chance to connect what they learn in the classroom to the real world, so they can make sense of what they are learning.

I taught 7th grade remedial students to write journalism leads and effective journalistic tweets. Their knowledge of social media and texting helped them learn and use the new skills by applying what they already knew. Their interest in social media helped motivate them and instill a desire to learn.

Media literacy needs to be applied to all content areas, not just English Language Arts and Social Studies.

Since Common Core is not going anyway anytime soon, we need to examine ways to promote media literacy education. Media literacy can be integrated into all content areas at every grade level and can be integrated with the Common Core Standards. Media literacy will provide students with a hand-on learning experience that promotes collaboration, critical thinking, communication, creativity, and cultural competency. These are the 5 C's of the Common Core and are designed to help students be successful outside of the classroom.

I have written about the correlation between media literacy, citizenship, and democracy. As I wrote in [“Why Media Literacy Matters - Democratic Values”](#):

People need to learn how to make their own choices. They need to learn how to think for themselves. This is where media literacy comes in. Media literacy is about empowerment, critical thinking, participation.

With the Internet, people have access to vast amounts of information. But having information and being informed are two completely different things.

Media literacy prepares us to fully participate as citizens in a world dominated by media messages.

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