Contextual Media Literacy Revisited

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Abstract
Media literacy educators debate the extent to which they should focus on the critical analysis and creative production of media texts, or on the critical analysis of systems and institutions that produce and circulate media texts. This paper argues that a narrow focus on media texts tends to result in cynical and apathetic affective student learning outcomes while a focus on both texts and systems cultivates a sense of agency and empowerment.

Introduction
The call for papers for this issue of Academic Exchange Quarterly posed the question: How can teachers use media literacy to empower students? In order to address this question, this paper weighs in on the ongoing debate regarding whether media literacy should focus primarily on the critical analysis and creative production of media texts, or whether it should also focus on the critical analysis and potential reform of systems and institutions that produce and circulate media texts (Baran & Baran, 2004; Hobbs, 1998; Lewis & Jhally, 1998). Based on ten years of experience as a professor of media literacy, and extensive student feedback on both approaches, I argue that the latter approach is more empowering.

Debates in the Field
In 1998, the Journal of Communication published a number of articles on media literacy that remain as relevant today as they were then. One of the articles, by Renee Hobbs, discussed “The Seven Great Debates in the Media Literacy Movement” (1998). Two of these debates were as follows: “should media literacy have a more explicit political and ideological agenda?” (p.22) and “should media literacy initiatives be supported financially by commercial media organizations?” (p. 26). The “agenda” in the first debate refers largely to a media reform agenda, which has clear implications for the second question.

These two specific debates, which are still alive and well among media literacy educators, pertain to the more general debate identified above. The first debate pertains because when students examine the institutional context within which media texts are produced and distributed, they are confronted with public policy issues and processes that are political and ideological by nature. Moreover, an examination of these public policy issues and processes tends to lead to an examination of the media reform movement, because the movement has become a key player in this public policy arena. The second debate pertains because the critical analysis of media systems and institutions tends to be constrained within media literacy initiatives that are supported by commercial media organizations. Such organizations do not want to fund educational initiatives that might critically analyze their own institutional forms and motives, might expose the influence of their powerful lobbies, might question whether they are fulfilling their public-interest obligations, and might, in turn, suggest the possibility or desirability of media reform.

A second article in that same issue of the Journal of Communication addresses, even more directly, the issue of whether media literacy should focus primarily on the critical
analysis and creative production of media texts, or whether it should also focus on the
critical analysis of systems and institutions that produce and circulate media texts. In
"The Struggle over Media Literacy," Lewis and Jhally distinguish between textual and
contextual approaches to media literacy (1998). Textual approaches focus primarily on
the critical analysis (and sometimes production) of media messages. Contextual
approaches include the critical analysis of messages, but also incorporate analysis of the
political and economic context within which media messages are produced and
circulated. Based on this distinction, Lewis and Jhally argue against a purely text-
centered approach and assert that
media literacy should integrate a textual analysis with questions of production and
reception. An analysis of the structure of media institutions is particularly important...
The mass media, in other words, should be understood as more than a collection of
texts to be deconstructed and analyzed so that we can distinguish or choose among
them. They should be analyzed as sets of institutions with particular social and
economic structures that are neither inevitable nor irreversible. (p. 109)

This integrated approach, they argue, results not merely in more critically savvy
consumers of texts, but also in more informed citizens who understand the socially
constructed nature of media systems and can work to reform them, if they so desire.

A Rift in the Media Literacy Community
Shortly after the publication of the articles discussed above, the Alliance for a Media
Literate America (AMLA) – the leading national media literacy organization at the time
– split into two competing organizations over the issue of whether or not to accept
commercial media funding. When the AMLA accepted such funding, the Action
Coalition for Media Education (ACME) was formed as an alternative organization that
explicitly rejected all commercial funding. Ever since the initial split, AMLA has
pursued a more politically and ideologically neutral agenda while ACME has pursued a
more activist media reform agenda. Likewise, the AMLA website and conferences tend
to focus on textual approaches while the ACME website and conferences tend to focus
on contextual approaches. The underlying issues therefore remain contested issues
within the media literacy community to this day (Baran & Baran, 2004).

Weighing in on the Debate
Based on a decade of experience teaching media literacy to undergraduate university
students, as well as ongoing attendance at both AMLA and ACME conferences, and
experimentation with both textual and contextual approaches, I have concluded that
contextual approaches are more effective and empowering. This conclusion, however,
is based only partly on the rationale offered by Lewis and Jhally.

Lewis and Jhally argue that it is not possible to engage in meaningful textual analysis
without examining the institutional context within which texts are produced. This is
because texts are inseparable from the institutional contexts in which they are created.
Put simply, stable message patterns are the result of specific institutional forms.
Students need to study the institutional context because the context determines what is
present and absent in texts, whose voice is heard and whose is not, whose interests are
served and whose are not – and why. This point may seem obvious, yet many media
literacy educators, and many media literacy curricula, fail to provide this contextual
analysis.

My experience in the classroom strongly supports the value of such contextual analysis. When
students develop the skills to critically analyze individual media texts, they gain insights

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regarding the construction of individual media texts. However, when students also develop skills to critically analyze the systems that produce media texts, then they gain insights into the mass production and circulation of stable patterns of media texts. Granted, purely textual approaches to media literacy may lead students to detect such patterns, but contextual approaches help students understand and explain the underlying causes of those patterns. For instance, a textual approach to media literacy will help students learn how to critically deconstruct specific commercial news stories in order to see how media workers include and exclude various views and voices, embed specific points of view in the accompanying photography or videography, and frame the interpretation of issues through the use of metaphors, metonyms, and other rhetorical devices. A contextual approach to media literacy, however, will also examine the organizational imperatives that compel commercial media to construct news stories as dramatic spectacles, designed to manufacture audiences as cheaply as possible, in order to sell their attention to advertisers for a maximum profit. These latter insights help students understand and explain the underlying reasons for specific patterns in media content, thus enabling them to think critically about the social construction (and potential reform) of media systems.

A second argument that Lewis and Jhally advance is rooted, ultimately, in a normative theory that is widely accepted in contemporary democracies, is embedded in the First Amendment to the United States constitution (through its protections for free speech and freedom of the press), and has been repeatedly supported by interpretations from the U.S. Supreme Court (Cooper, 2005). According to this normative theory, contemporary democracies require the press to facilitate the exchange of diverse views, ideas, and information because the press has become an essential forum for democratic deliberation in large complex societies. A contextual approach to media literacy examines media texts and institutions through the lens of this normative theory. In the process, it engages students in fundamental questions about democratic processes, media systems, the socially constructed rules that govern those systems, and the possibilities of change. For instance, commercial broadcast media in the United States operate on publicly owned airwaves under publicly granted licenses that require them to serve the “public interest, convenience, and necessity” – including the processes of democratic deliberation that are rooted in the First Amendment. This concept of the public interest thus serves as a tool that all citizens can use to assess the performance of broadcast media organizations, weigh in on the periodic renewal of broadcast licenses, and consider other measures for media reform. A purely textual approach to media literacy obscures these possibilities.

Again, my experience in the classroom strongly supports the value of a contextual approach in this regard. Before students arrive in my undergraduate classes, many have been exposed to at least some critical analysis of media texts – usually focused on the most salient patterns of contemporary media content such as the objectification of women or violence in the media. Very few students, however, have been exposed to any institutional analysis that might help explain these content patterns. Moreover, virtually none of my students arrive with prior education regarding the political economy of the media or regarding the deeper relationship between media institutions and broader democratic processes. As a result, most students arrive in my classes with the unexamined assumption that the American mass media have evolved along some natural or inevitable path. To the extent that students have developed critical attitudes toward specific patterns of media content, they tend to merely accept those patterns as inevitable features of their media environment. Cynicism – the attitude that humans are incapable of something better – is thus one of the predominant outcomes of a narrow textual approach. This is not empowering.

One could argue, of course, that the creative production of media messages (which the textual approach sometimes incorporates) is, in itself, an empowering act. Yet how empowering is it to learn how to produce messages that are then consistently excluded from mass circulation within the public sphere? This is precisely the experience of
diverse groups whose voices are systematically excluded from the mass media, not because these groups lack the skills to communicate but because what they have to say is not always compatible with the political and economic interests that filter commercial media content (e.g., Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989; Fortunato, 2005; Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Lapham, 2004; McChesney, 2004; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996).

From Cynicism to Empowerment

The problem of cynicism, and the apathy that tends to flow from it, pertain directly to the question: How can teachers use media literacy to empower students? Although cynicism and apathy are not empowering learning outcomes, they are predictable outcomes of a purely textual approach for the following reasons. When students develop the analytical skills to examine media texts critically, they generally arrive at the conclusion that our media environment is characterized by many problematic features which are highly repetitive and stable across the media landscape. These include unrealistic but highly persuasive messages about female beauty and sexuality, female eating habits, and female roles in society (American Psychological Association, 2007; Merskin, 2004; Perse, 2001; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002; Wykes & Gunter, 2005). They include equally problematic messages about masculinity, aggression, violence, and the projection of power (e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; American Psychological Association, 1993; Katz, 2000, 2003; Kirsh, 2006; Perse, 2001). They include problematic stereotypes and harmful misrepresentations of entire populations (e.g., Bryant & Thompson, 2002; Entman, 2000; Kilpatrick, 1999; Said, 1997, Shaheen, 2001; Sparks, 2002; Weimann, 2000). They include the exclusion of diverse values and perspectives and the construction of democratic processes as consumer spectacle (e.g., Bryant & Thompson, 2002; Compton, 2005; Hackett & Zhao, 1998; Karlberg, 2003; McChesney, 2004). And they include the ubiquitous underlying message that material consumption is the ultimate source of human happiness – a message that is misleading, unhealthy, and ecologically unsustainable (e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006; Budd, Craig, & Steinman, 1999; Jeffres, 1997; Jhally, 1987, 1993; Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1997; Schor, 1999).

All of these messages can exert powerful influences on the unconscious mind and many of these messages are designed and field tested by professionals who are very skilled at achieving such influence. Educators, public health professionals, and environmental scholars are increasing concluding that these influences come with very high social, psychological, and ecological costs (e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001, 2006; American Psychological Association, 1993, 2007; Cox, 2006; Gonzales, Glik, Davoudi, & Ang, 2004; Hansen, 1991; Holtzman, 2004; Kilbourne, 1999; LaMay & Dennis, 1991). In my experience, once students develop the analytical skills to critically examine media texts, they begin to recognize these costs. However, when students do not develop the corresponding skills of contextual analysis, they fail to recognize public policy responses that might reduce these costs.

A purely textual approach, in effect, offers intellectual self-defense skills to combat media assaults and abuses that are then assumed to be an inevitable feature of our media environment. The approach stops short of educating students regarding the ways that media systems are socially constructed; it stops short of helping them understand that the media can be reformed; and it stops short of helping students discover ways they can exercise agency in these processes in order to reduce or eliminate these media assaults and abuses.

An equivalent approach in the natural sciences would be to educate students about the threats that many forms of pollution pose to human health and to the ecological systems that support us, and then give them a few tips on how to try, individually, to cope with such pollution – without helping them understand why we have the pollution in the first place, how we might collectively reduce it, and what they can do to help bring about such change. Of course, not all media message are “polluting” or harmful, and skilled media literacy educators also help students develop appreciation for high quality media and develop the skills to seek this out. But many stable and repetitive patterns of media content are problematic and students learn to recognize this when they examine media content critically.
In this regard, the contextual approach to media literacy focuses on problems as well as systemic solutions. For instance, most economists agree that the free market cannot effectively provide for important public goods (like roads and other forms of public infrastructure); that market pricing mechanisms cannot account for negative externalities (like costs associated with pollution); and that governments therefore have a role to play in the provision of public goods as well as the regulation of negative externalities. My experience shows that when students examine media systems through this lens, they arrive at the conclusion that some media functions (like facilitating democratic deliberation) are important public goods that require some public support; and that media externalities (like the high social, psychological, and ecological costs of hyper-commercialized media) require some public regulation. Moreover, media policy scholars and reform advocates have articulated a range of relevant policy options that my students have proven capable of grasping as well as interested in learning about and discussing. Students also tend to feel empowered by these insights. As one student wrote in a course evaluation following my (contextual) media literacy course:

Although the subject matter is troubling and at times depressing, I never had a class that made me feel so good. To have my frustrations explained and possible solutions discussed leaves me in a place to share and spread the word. Media and social change is possible!

Another student wrote “I learned a lot from this course and am inspired – definitely less cynical now… You gave me hope.” Yet another wrote that “now I don’t feel so helpless. I now know there is a ray of hope.” This written feedback, which is fairly typical in my course evaluations, is corroborated by similar verbal feedback I often receive from students, some of whom go on to graduate school to study media literacy or media policy, or get involved with media activism in some way. These are not cynical or apathetic outcomes. They are empowering outcomes that are rooted in a sense of agency.

Conclusion
Educators can use media literacy to empower students by focusing not only on the critical analysis and creative production of media texts, but also on the critical analysis and potential reform of the systems and institutions that produce and circulate those texts. This is not an ideologically subversive or “un-American” approach. It is consistent with the theory of media and democracy that is embedded in the American constitution. If public education is to serve as a buttress to democracy, as John Dewey (1916) and countless other American educators have advocated, students need to examine media messages and systems through the lens of democratic theory, and they need to develop a sense of agency in relation to their media environment.

References


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Academic Exchange – Fall 2007