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# Media & Information Literacy Theory and Research: Thoughts from the Co-editors

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# Media & Information Literacy Theory and Research: Thoughts from the Co-editors

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## ABSTRACT

An overview of the conceptualization of media studies and information literacy education reveals the importance of analyzing text *and* visual communication. Beyond simply offering an explanation of mass communication and all of its parts, media and information literacy as an emerging field of study must begin to address the complex interaction between literacy and new media forms. The new co-editors of *SIMILE* encourage interdisciplinary scholarship, which illuminates new avenues in media and information literacy education.

Media studies and information literacy education have their roots in early research about the ability to read, write and speak (Ruben, 1997). More recently, scholars have considered the connection between these areas and the development of visual and computer literacy skills (Potter, 2001). Media literacy has been defined as a perspective related to media exposure and making meaning out of messages:

We build our perspective from knowledge structures. To build our knowledge structures, we need tools and raw material. The tools are our skills. The raw material is information from the media and from the real world. Active use means that we are aware of the messages and are consciously interacting with them (Potter, 2001, p. 4).

In the information age, it is important for individuals to go beyond simply reading text since powerful visual images dominate the media and information landscape. In fact, the definition of text has been expanded to include a variety of forms and content beyond traditional print media—including cumulative, frequent and repetitive electronic media messages that produce new meanings (Silverblatt, 1995). Language constructions, whether through printed word or electronic media, can be seen as “an endless chain of ambiguous associations and connections that offer wide potentialities for interpretation and for manipulation” (Edelman, 1988, p. 111).

Hobbs (1997) challenges us to re-think our concepts by raising questions about visual literacy:

- Do images tell the truth?
- What meanings do different people see in images?
- How do words shape the meanings of images?
- How do the authors of images shape their messages?
- Why do images arouse us emotionally? (pp. 163–164).

Literacy studies may draw us into a deeper understanding of mass communication processes and effects, or they may address broader questions about cultural literacy and citizen knowledge (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1987; 2002).

The obvious starting point for conceptualizing media literacy would be to understand the importance of educating young people (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). If critical thinking skills about media are learned at an early age, then more research is needed on children. The focus needs to be on what they are being taught in the schools to “. . . develop children’s ability to protect themselves from—or, more positively, to understand and to deal effectively with—the broader media environment” (Buckingham, 2000, p. 205).

Beyond simply offering an explanation of mass communication and all of its parts, media and information literacy as an emerging field of study must begin to address the complex interaction between literacy and new media forms. For example, having the skills to read and write does not guarantee that one can adequately navigate the World Wide Web. People of *all ages* must learn literacy skills, but these also may be lost through severe injury or declining mental or physical capacities. At the same time, even those judged as illiterate may be able to see, hear and interpret media photographs, audio and video. Traditional media may be easier to navigate than digital choices.

In this rich environment, an exciting new electronic journal published articles addressing media and information literacy. In the five years since *SIMILE* was launched, there has been a proliferation of online journals, but *SIMILE* is unique in suggesting that scholarship could be distributed without the benefit of paper copies. Founding Editor Juris Dilevko guided the development of *SIMILE* by encouraging submission and publication of high quality research, particularly those studies which might not neatly fit into traditional venues. We congratulate him for doing this without sacrificing the rigors of peer review and high standards.

The School of Communication, University of Nebraska at Omaha is the new home for *SIMILE*. The Co-Editors continue to encourage the development of the journal by expanding our editorial board, by reaching out to new communities of scholars, and by publishing articles that advance the study of media and information literacy. We are interested in quantitative and/or qualitative research from any field. Interdisciplinary research is encouraged. *SIMILE* wishes to reach out for a wide range of social, cultural and psychological theoretical perspectives—from education, media studies, information studies and other appropriate areas. In moving beyond the roots of media and information literacy studies, we challenge scholars to offer creative approaches.

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#### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Dr. *Lipschultz* (Ph.D., Southern Illinois University, 1990) is Robert T. Reilly Diamond Professor and Director of the School of Communication at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He teaches media theory, research, technology and regulation. Dr. Lipschultz was the recipient of the UNO Outstanding Research/Creative Activity Award (2004) and UNO Alumni Outstanding Teaching Award in the College of Arts and Sciences, Humanities Division (2001). He is a Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) advisor to the International Academy for Advanced Decision Support (IAADS). Dr. Hilt (Ph.D., University of Nebraska, 1994) is Professor and Graduate Program Chair in the School of Communication at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He teaches broadcast journalism, writing, and quantitative research. Dr. Hilt was honored with the UNO Alumni Outstanding Teaching Award in the College of Arts and Sciences, Humanities Division (2000).

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