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Research Note: International Issues in Media and Information Literacy

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ABSTRACT

The emerging field of media and information literacy studies continues to be influenced by a wide range of interdisciplinary research. An inventory of current research on media and information literacy, using *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education (SIMILE)* as a database, reveal emphases in studies about schools and education, library usage, mass media, intercultural communication, and global media. As individuals around the globe are empowered by their media and information literacy skills, it is possible that these abilities will be harnessed as cultural tools in the grassroots battles to maintain local and national identities.

The emerging field of media and information literacy studies continues to be influenced by a wide range of interdisciplinary research. Media studies frequently address literacy concerns as they relate to news construction, audience perception of stories, and cultivation of long-term beliefs. At the same time library studies have been at the heart of questions related to how people seek, find, process, and use new information.

In this global age, a challenge for researchers will be to blend media and information studies (Lipschultz & Hilt, 2005). As scholars explore new research questions, studies tend to focus upon use of text and visual images. Internet studies have become increasingly important over time, and other new media forms are likely to follow. Within the past year, for example, podcasting has gone from novelty to significant audio medium. As people adopt new and different media, studies will need to be grounded in what we already know about the development of visual and computer literacy skills (Potter, 2001). Potter defined media literacy as a perspective related to media exposure and making meaning out of messages. Individual literacy skills, in this view, are central to an understanding of the interaction between people, messages, sounds, and visual images (Hobbs, 1997).

Meaning making, then, involves both cognitive processing and affective emotional response. For example, a common problem expressed by professors is that students too often search Google and no other sources for their research papers, and then fail to critically examine the sources. In response, Purdue University recently created an endowed chair in Information Literacy (Carlson, 2005). Cultural literacy and citizen knowledge (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1987; 2002) increasingly involve cross-cultural and intercultural communication.

Analysis of Recent Research

An inventory of current research on media and information literacy, using *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education (SIMILE)* as a database, reveal emphases in studies about schools and education, library usage, mass media, intercultural communication, and global media. From the outset, founding editor Juris Dilevko defined the mission of SIMILE: "The journal is intended to be an electronic meeting place for anyone and everyone interested in the broad subject of media literacy" (Dilevko, 2001, p. 1). An analysis of studies published between February 2001 and May 2005 demonstrated an emerging pattern of approaches.

Alozie (2003) studied cultural values and ideas in Nigerian advertisements. He found that Nigerian ads used Western and traditional cultural values. Nigerian values such as family and savings were also present in the ads. Such studies highlight the importance of culture. For example, Shah (2003) studied Asian

culture as portrayed in films and television shows produced in the United States. The study found four dominant stereotypes that were critiqued as controlling images for audience members.

Developments in new media, such as the Internet, have presented new research questions about how the public processes information and entertainment. Levine (2005) discussed the proliferation of unreliable information and the challenges posed by it: "Some prominent individuals and institutions are calling for schools to prepare young people to identify reliable information online" (p. 1). In this context, there is a call for formalized "information literacy education" in the schools.

Vered (2001) contended that one important issue for schools is the examination of media use in different environments. The Australian study of a recreational center brought to light social dimensions in the use of media during free time. Hart's (2001) case study in the United Kingdom focused on the work of one classroom media teacher. The challenge is to go beyond teaching basic skills and relate media to students' larger cultural experiences and knowledge. In New Zealand, Lealand (2001) described how a group of 8 to 14 year-olds access and use media. The study offered implications for how educators need to respond to the larger context of student media use in a global and multimedia environment. In such a world, media and information literacy must be placed within a context of critical multicultural education (Writer & Chavez, 2001).

Yates (2002) placed the research focus on public and private elementary and secondary school teachers. His case study found that there was support for the goals and values of media education, but the constraints of curriculum, time, and resources limited teachers' willingness to expand instruction and include media education. Yates' (2004) conclusion was that while media literacy education has spread throughout the United States, it has not been fully adopted by educators. The analysis reminds us that media and information literacy education have yet to reach a mature status as an integral and essential part of school curricula.

Schools present one challenge for the field of media and information literacy, but libraries are a different context for research. Widzinski (2001) addressed the evolution of media librarianship. The technological and social changes in the library environment pose significant new questions for the field of media and information literacy. Librarians and library patrons are increasingly likely to be in interaction with one another, likely to be utilizing technology, and likely to approximate pedagogical structure. This blending of classroom and library contexts will continue to evolve.

In some ways, the changes occurring in American classrooms and libraries have circled the globe. Thus, intercultural issues have become more prominent and the need for theory more essential. Olson (2002) reviewed postcolonial theory, transnational media strategies, and fundamental concepts that address cultural problems such as hybridization, identity, sedimentation, reification, adaptation, mollification, eruption, deconstruction, mutation, intensification, and politicization. One can imagine a complex set of interactions between these concepts, which help define alterations in traditional culture and the impact on media and information literacy.

Discussion

The field of study needs to develop better answers to the fundamental question: Why do media and information literacy matter? They matter because people of all walks of life across the globe need to be able to deconstruct media messages and critique the quality of information sources. For example, many days after 9/11 there came a moment when morning network TV shows left coverage and returned to the mundane: cooking recipes, review of the latest popular music artist CD, and the following of sensational murder cases. Likewise, we could have predicted the shift away from Hurricane Katrina coverage. While content studies shed some light on the ebb and flow of news cycles, viewers armed with media and information literacy knowledge and skills would immediately recognize what is happening and why. From organizational routines to individual behaviors, news and information matters. Niven (2005) theorized how media tactics help explain media content from a political and economic perspective. This level of understanding about media behavior needs to diffuse into media and information literacy education.

Media and information literacy remains in most places outside the definition of what elementary and secondary school age students *need* to know. This is even the case in most higher education requirements. If everyone seems to agree that we live in a media and information age, why have educators been so slow to respond? Is it because of politics, economics, or some other macro explanations? This is a potentially rich area of study, which remains somewhat on the edge of more traditional disciplines. This, however, must and will change in the global media and information age. Future studies of globalization are likely to place increasing importance on cultural theory, democratic theory, and development of new social movements (Best, 2005). As individuals around the globe are empowered by their media and information literacy skills, it is possible that these abilities will be harnessed as cultural tools in grassroots battles to maintain local and national identities.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Dr. Lipschultz and *Dr. Hilt* are co-editors of *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education (SIMILE)*. The School of Communication, University of Nebraska at Omaha is the editorial 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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