A Sexier Literacy: Information Literacy through Media Literacy

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Abstract

The similarities in scope and objectives between information literacy and media literacy education are remarkable. On the surface, each is concerned with issues of access, analysis, evaluation, and use or production. Even beyond these basic tenets, guiding learners toward critical thought, creative agency, ethical use and production of information, and civic empowerment are shared concerns. In fact, as librarians begin to work with the generation of students dubbed "Generation M" by the Kaiser Family Foundation, we will increasingly find the distinctions between information and media literacies breaking down. Generation M, or the media generation, has grown up steeped in media exposure and with unprecedented access to technologies enabling information consumption and production. Recognizing and addressing the unique relationship this generation feels to media and information offers us an exciting opportunity to re-imagine information literacy instruction at the college level. Additionally, media literacy instruction invites librarians to forge dynamic working partnerships with professors, information technologists, and local media activists. While the term "information literacy" might alienate some potential allies, media studies scholarship is a familiar discipline for faculty and media-makers already working with film, television, cyber-journalism, and digital media.

Article

The organizers of LOEX 2007 noticed such striking similarities between two proposals, in which each posited the integration of information literacy and media literacy, that they asked the authors to work together to co-lead a discussion session. Thus began the partnership of two librarians on opposite ends of the country --Sara Prahl at Colby College in Maine and Shana Higgins at University of Redlands in California. In some respects, the two seem to approach the information-literacy-meets-media-literacy spectrum from opposite ends as well. Prahl's main focus is involving students in media production as a means of developing the skills required for engaging in academic and civic discourse. To these ends, she implemented a semester-long "Media Literacy in Action" seminar, which involved Colby students, faculty, and staff with regional media makers and activists in exploring the impact and promise of local media production. Seminar topics included zine publication, media and environmental activism, Maine Indymedia, radio documentary, digital storytelling, public access cable news, and documentary filmmaking. Higgins has taken the approach that the information sources students frequently utilize are media artifacts, not simply content displayed in various formats. Therefore she focuses on the concept of representation and seeks to provide students with the tools to critically evaluate information sources—websites, magazines, databases, encyclopedias, video—which all have their own genre characteristics. Prahl and Higgins attend not so much to opposite ends of a continuum then, but rather highlight particular aspects of media literacy in order to elucidate information literacy concepts.

Why consider media literacy integral to our information literacy curricula? There really are so many reasons, but the authors posit just a few. First, as mentioned above, the basic tenets of both literacy movements align. Each aims at producing individuals interested in life-long learning by encouraging critical thought regarding access, use, and production of all forms of media and information sources. As Barbara Fister (2003) has argued, "Media literacy and information literacy efforts have similar goals but are too often pursued as separate agendas, not out of theoretical

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differences, but out of lack of contact among the stakeholders" (p. 46). As academic librarians we may remain too entrenched in the tenets of information literacy as defined by the Association of Academic and Research Libraries (ACRL), neglecting to engage the conceptual frameworks of the disciplines. Likewise, disciplinary faculty have little time to contemplate how the learning outcomes of information literacy map onto their own discipline's principles. Second, we are daily bombarded with media messages: the billboard on the side of the freeway, the radio we listen to on the way to work, the many devices of the Internet, the newspaper, the television, etc. Not even the "vetted" information sources within the library's walls or virtual walls should be considered value-free. Furthermore, our incoming undergraduate students have grown up immersed in the media proliferation of the last fifteen years. It is imperative that students develop a critical understanding of their relationship to the media that inform their lives and shape their realities so they might become more effectively engaged citizens. Finally, media literacy as a field of study is a more accessible concept for many teaching faculty than is information literacy, a term which frequently causes consternation and annoyance among disciplinary faculty. For these reasons, and others not listed, Prahl and Higgins believe that instructional librarians should broaden the scope of information literacy instruction to include media literacy.

The "A Sexier Literacy: Information Literacy through Media Literacy" discussion session began with a game of association in order to illustrate that we are all media literate. Using Heidi Cody's *American Alphabet* (2000) installation artwork, the group of discussants proved themselves to be, at least, brand literate by identifying all but two of the first letters of popular American brand names. Although the game is fun, the realization that one might pass this quiz so easily can be unsettling. What does it mean that we are not only able to recognize brands from their partial representations, but in seeing each letter we instantly understand the messages behind the brands as well? What are we reading, in every moment, from the media-saturated environment we live in? What messages and realities are we complicit in perpetuating? How equipped are we to make our own voices heard? As background for discussion, Prahl and Higgins provided common definitions of media literacy and mapped these to the key information literacy concepts defined by the ACRL. The bulk of the introduction period of the discussion session was given to outlining the characteristics of what the Kaiser Family Foundation has dubbed "Generation M" - those in the age group of eight to eighteen year-olds as of 2005 and our college freshmen for the coming decade. Some of the more salient points from the foundation's report include: 1) young people continue to spend upwards of six hours per day with some form of media, but now are using more media at once; 2) it has become more common to use a variety of media without adult supervision; 3) television remains the most used medium; 4) and computers are used more for academic work than for recreation. In response to these findings, will our information literacy efforts evolve over the next few years to best address the learning styles and expectations of these students? Prahl and Higgins presented some examples of how they have started to incorporate media literacy into their work as information literacy librarians.

The discussion period was opened with a few guiding questions for discussants: what might integrating media literacy awareness into your library's instruction services mean for your institution? What do you already do that might be augmented by applying media literacy principles? And what new avenues do you see for collaboration or unique instructional opportunities through integration of media literacy education? A few interesting themes surfaced during the exchange of comments and questions.

The issue of teaching "authority" was brought up in a number of ways. From finding ways to use media literacy to dissuade students from the belief that anything found on EBSCO databases is "true" to some disagreement among librarians on whether the "vetted" information within the "walls" of the library should or should not be automatically taken as authoritative. Interestingly, only days after the LOEX 2007 conference, Marc Meola wrote a post on the ACRLog with the title, "Authoritative Sources Or Question Authority?" Meola queried whether "in our desire to slam home the point that 'authoritative' library resources are better than the free web we promote a bit too much trust in authority." That is, students are not encouraged to engage in critical thought and critical evaluative skills if they are simply scolded not to use the World Wide Web and to trust library resources. Even academic/scholarly materials should be scrutinized. A critical media literacy approach would challenge students to explore "how power and information are always linked" (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 62), regardless of its location and/or authorship.

While the concept of authority remained contested in the discussion session, the group seemed unanimous in its genuine concern with integrating issues of authority into curriculum. Questions included: How do we teach evaluative skill in databases where the articles have been stripped of many external cues? How do we integrate ethics of information use and production into our teaching? Are multi-media demonstrations of learning more able at fostering lifelong learners? There were also questions of how to develop in one-shot sessions or to embed in course syllabi activities/assignments that encourage the expansion of both media and information literacies. While the authors hope the many ideas to promote these literacies continue to be talked about, written about, and shared, they offered a couple suggestions. Higgins proposed exercises that asked students to follow an event in multiple media formats in order to "discover" the varied languages of representation and ways of reading. Fister (2003) recommends a similar project. She asserts that it is not enough to supply students with checklists to evaluate websites or book reviews to determine the value of a book. By examining a controversial issue in multiple mediums, one can demonstrate the varied ways in which the issue is represented and discuss the particular drives behind the different publishing enterprises (book, newspaper and magazine, television, and government documents). Such activities would begin to develop students' own abilities to evaluate sources in the many forms they encounter, thus integrating media literacy and information literacy for a deeper knowledge of the processes of information dissemination and the politics of representation. To this end, Higgins is developing a semester-long first-year seminar titled

"Question Authority" that will engage these processes as a means to introduce first-year students to critical thinking skills necessary for college-level work in any discipline.

In one-shot-sessions, Prahl frequently uses short movies, such as *EPIC 2014* and shorts from the Media That Matters Film Festival, that both utilize the affective qualities of filmic media to engage students but also to deconstruct those same features. Film is visually, aurally, and textually engaging, providing a way to launch discussions of authority and media as constructions, as well as the commercial implications of media/media ownership. Media are powerful influences in the lives of our students and therefore media can be powerful tools for critical engagement. Whereas short film provides an effective catalyst to conversation and activity in a short class, involvement in producing short movies can lead to a complex exploration of research interests. To exemplify this, Prahl discussed her work to develop and facilitate digital storytelling workshops for students and faculty. The first such workshop led directly to the successful integration of digital storytelling into the fabric of an upper-level English class. This involvement in media production unquestionably deepened students' engagement with the subjects of their research and their peers' presentations, ultimately attracting the attention of Environmental Studies faculty and fostering cross-disciplinary screenings/discussions of the class's work. As one discussion session participant remarked, faculty often see librarians as "the research people" which often limits our role in their eyes to instruction on the access and evaluation of information. Branching out into media literacy instruction offers us a forum for discussing the imaginative and ethical use of information, even beyond the research paper. In fact, the discussion session ended with a final comment directing all in attendance to a New York Times editorial that posited Cinema Studies as the new "all-purpose" degree. The editorial by Elizabeth Van Ness is titled, "Is a Cinema Studies Degree the New MBA?" (March 6, 2005). A Yale Law School student is quoted as having had no intention of becoming a filmmaker when he took a degree in film studies, but because "he saw his major as a way to learn about power structures and how individuals influence each other."

Judging from the large number of attendees at this discussion session, the confluence of information literacy and media literacy is on the radar of many instruction librarians. A goal of "life-long learning" requires more than simply teaching students about "authority" or how to navigate databases. Sending students into the post-college world with a deeper knowledge of media, in its many forms, and its relationships with "audiences, information, and power" (Kellner & Share, 2007) along with the ability to produce messages in various media, prepares adults for civic engagement. Prahl and Higgins believe integrating information and media literacies, forming partnerships with media experts and scholars on our campuses and communities, will set us sailing with full sails up.

The PowerPoint slideshow, supporting documents, and further discussion can be found at http://literacies.pbwiki.com. Please join the conversation on integrating literacies at the wiki—the password is _media_.

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