Young people today are growing up in a media-saturated world. Before they even begin their formal education in school, children learn from the myriad forms of media they encounter in their social environments. Market research indicates that 40% of infants as young as three months old, watch “screen media” on a regular basis, and that this number increases to 90% by the time children are two years old (Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood). Children as young as two years old are being exposed to over 250,000 advertisements a year, and research tells us that by the age of three, children are already requesting brand name items. Young people are also more “connected” than ever before. A recent Canadian study (media-awareness) revealed that the majority of young people in Canada have Internet access and that many students are engaging in social networking and with tools like text messaging on a daily basis (Media-Awareness Network, 2005). While young people are consuming media like never before, they are also increasingly becoming the producers of their own media. For example, Web 2.0 type applications have made it possible for people to produce their own websites, blogs, networks, avatars, YouTube videos, music, etc. Because Web 2.0 applications encourage a more user-centered approach to the Internet, anyone (even a young child) can be a media producer without needing many technical skills. So why is this media saturation important for educators to engage with?

“We are immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society, and thus it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its institutions, practices, discourses, images, and spectacles”

(Kellner, 2010, p. 5).
WHY TEACH MEDIA LITERACY?

In addition to providing youth (and adults) with fun and entertainment, media and popular culture are important because they provide us with an education. Whether we are aware of it or not, media and popular culture teach us very specific things about how to live (and how not to live) in the world.

Media scholars and educators believe that media and popular culture “are forms of pedagogy that teach people how to be men and women” (Kellner 2010, p. 6). Media and popular culture also teach people about what it means to be “different.” Media educator, Carlos Cortés writes that the mass media teaches us about “physical appearance, gender differences and relations, meanings of race, experiences with different ethnic groups”, among many other things (Cortés, p. 19). If “Pocahontas” is the first thing that comes to mind when a young person thinks of a famous Native American, it becomes evident that the media does more than just “entertain.” Popular images in the media and in popular culture often instill in us deep beliefs about “other” cultures and “other” people. Sadly, these ideas and beliefs often go unexamined or even unnoticed and can cause misunderstandings among people. As we can see, developing the skills to think critically about media-produced messages is becoming just as important as the ability to read and write.

“Media literacy” then, becomes an important skill. Put simply, media literacy is the ability to think critically (i.e. deeply and complexly) about media and popular culture. For instance, if we were to think critically about a particular media “text” like a film, we could ask questions about where it was produced, by whom, and for what purpose? What ideological messages dominate a particular media text and what do those ideologies reveal about the world? Developing media literacy skills can equip young people with the tools to better understand, critique and evaluate media messages, as well as empower them to create their own meanings and representations through media production. (Kellner & Share, 2007).
While there are different approaches to media literacy (see Kellner & Share 2007 for a more detailed discussion), a critical media literacy approach has the potential to transform society because of its focus on social justice. For example, educators teaching from this perspective might ask their students questions like: “What groups of people are missing from this show/magazine, etc.?,” “How is difference represented and why?” “How do popular media representations empower some groups of people and marginalize others?” “What kinds of stories are being told about people who may be different from you?” These are important questions that need to be addressed in schools, especially as they become increasingly diverse. Media literacy can become especially empowering for students who (because of their social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability) are marginalized or misrepresented in the media and in popular culture. When these marginalized or misrepresented groups “become investigators of their representations and creators of their own meanings, the learning process becomes an empowering expression of voice and democratic transformation” (Kellner & Share, p. 16).

In addition to asking critical questions about the “-isms” (such as racism, sexism, or classism), power and ideology, critical media literacy encourages production of alternative media. As previously discussed, young people today are no longer just media consumers. Many young people are active producers of content, which may be seen by hundreds and sometimes thousands of others online. Youth-created media production has the potential to challenge rather than reproduce inequality by allowing the voices of those on the margins to “talk back” and offer alternative readings of corporately-produced media and popular culture texts.
Unlike kids’ real lives outside of school, media-based study inside the school is rare. Teachers (as well as some parents) may feel that it’s the parent’s job to “restrict” media in the home. Such a protectionist approach often results in missing the potential of media literacy as an entry point to engaging with complex social and civic issues (such as social injustice, representations of current events, copyright laws, or the creative commons), as well as a missed opportunity to engage with youth via content that is a large part of their daily lives. This “protectionist” approach falsely assumes that young children cannot think critically about the media, or that they can in fact be “protected”. We know that “protecting” young children from media is a near impossible task in today’s world. Children are not only exposed to media messages at home when watching television, but also in their social environment, at the homes of family and friends, and even in schools.

Critical media literacy educators would not disagree with the fact that media can have a negative effect on young children and youth. However, avoiding important discussions about the media is a lost opportunity to engage youth about the things that constitute a great part of their lives. Having critical discussions about the media is a great way for young people to learn how to resist media forces and think about creating alternative media that is more inclusive. It has been shown that children as young as three years old have the ability to think critically about the media and about issues related to inequality and social justice. Perhaps more importantly, young children not only have the ability to think about important issues, they also have the ability to act on behalf of social issues they feel passionate about (for great examples see: Marshall & Sensoy 2011 and Share 2007).
References


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