FROM PROTECTION TO PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

A REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE ON MEDIA LITERACY

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Abstract

Discourses on media literacy have evolved from concerns about how children and young people relate to media contents, towards broader issues of social inclusion and public participation. In this article we take a closer look at the main understandings of media literacy within media research through a review of existing perspectives and research literature. First we aim to describe the main terminology and positionings concerning media literacy. Secondly we discuss the core issues of research within the field. Three levels are discerned within the literature: the personal level, the social interaction level and the media systems level. Finally we comment on the possible development of a unified research agenda in media literacy.

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Introduction

Media literacy has increasingly been coined as a prerequisite to create a participatory public within the information and knowledge society (Rassool 1999; Kellner & Share 2005). Our aim in this article is to show how the conceptual understanding of media literacy has evolved from a rather narrow perspective of training individual skills for media protection, towards a broader agenda of public media competences within democratic societies. This is mainly due to the impact of digital media on different levels within our societies and the new opportunities they represent for participation and citizenship, raising questions about the kind of skills and competences that are needed in our dealings with media in our daily lives.

This article is a review of existing perspectives and research literature on media literacy. The primary focus is on initiatives within Europe, but other country and regional initiatives will also be included. The presentation consists of two main parts. In the first part, a summary of terminology, definitions and positionings within the field of media literacy is presented. The second part consists of a discussion of different concepts and issues, within both research and policy, concerning media literacy within the literature. This part is divided into three sub-sections indicating different target levels of media literacy.

In our search for and collection of relevant reviews on media literacy, we found that the reviews were created with different purposes – some are more policy oriented, some are oriented towards practice and some are more clearly defined as research reviews. Accordingly, we tried to group the reviews together based on their purpose, and then analysed the reviews for key issues and ways of presenting these issues. In addition, we have included what might be termed 'meta-texts'; articles with a special focus on media literacy, special issues of journals, and books and reports that are comments on the field of 'media literacy' as such (European Commission 2007; EuroMeduc 2009; Danish Technological Institute 2010).

Conceptual Struggles

Before we discuss the core issues of reviews on media literacy, we want to briefly introduce the terminology, main definitions used and positionings in this field. This will provide a frame for the further discussion of core issues.

The Terminology

In a special issue on media literacy published in the *Journal of Communication* in 1998, the editor Alan Rubin starts by wondering: "For several decades we have been debating issues surrounding media literacy. It is somewhat perplexing why we really understand so little about the subject" (Rubin 1998, 3). Although the literature on media literacy, more recently described as digital literacy, has increased tremendously, and more about this subject is now understood, it is fair to say that we still struggle for a coherent understanding of the term 'media literacy' (Tyner 2010). Brown argues that:

> *The term media literacy means many things to many people. Traditionally, it has involved the ability to analyze and appreciate respected works of literature and, by extension, to communicate effectively by writing well. In the past half-century it has come to include the ability to analyze competently*

> *and to utilize skilfully print journalism, cinematic productions, radio and television programming, and even computer-mediated information and exchange (including real-time interactive exploration through the global internet)* (Brown 1998, 44).

This was written at a time when digital media were still in the beginning phase of major transitions. However, we are still relating to many media, both analogue and digital, and as such 'media literacy' covers many different media with different ways of representation.

Some definitions have made a mark in the media literacy literature. In 2003, Ofcom was charged with the responsibility to promote media literacy in the UK. Ofcom's role has primarily been as a market regulator, rather than a content regulator. Ofcom's definition of media literacy: "the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts" (Ofcom 2005), derives from an older US definition by Aufderheide (1997). The Ofcom definition has been widely adopted internationally. Ofcom in 2005 commissioned two literature reviews with different focus areas, one written by Buckingham et al. (2005) and one written by Livingstone, van Couvering and Thumim (2005). Buckingham later commented on Ofcom's position:

> *Of course, this comes packaged as a democratic move – a move away from protectionism and towards empowerment. But it is also an individualising move: it seems to be based on a view of media literacy as a personal attribute, rather than as a social practice. Indeed, it could be seen to place a burden on individuals that they might not necessarily be disposed or able to cope with. And while it gives people responsibilities, it does not also extend their rights: it positions them as consumers rather than as citizens. It has become the duty of all good consumers – and, when it comes to children, of all good parents —to regulate their own media uses* (Buckingham 2009, 16–17).

Livingstone also commented in a later report that this definition by Ofcom pays far more attention to skills of access and use than to critical or creative skills (Livingstone 2010, 40–42). As Livingstone (2010, 42) points out: "Behind the debate over definitions … is a fundamental debate over the purposes of media literacy."

This fundamental debate becomes obvious when looking at some of the other main definitions of media literacy. One dominant definition comes from a US-based tradition focusing on skills and information processing, based on a cognitive approach. In *Media Literacy*, Potter uses the following description:

> *Media literacy is a perspective that we actively use when exposing ourselves to the media in order to interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter. 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, 4).

This definition can be said to follow the individualising move Buckingham points out above. Buckingham's own definition is more representative of a UK-based cultural studies approach. In his book *Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture*, he writes:

> *Literacy is not seen here merely as a kind of cognitive 'tool kit' that enables people to understand and use media. And media education is thus rather more than a kind of training course or proficiency test in media-related skills. For want of a better term, media literacy is a form of critical literacy. It involves analysis, evaluation and critical reflection. It entails the acquisition of a 'metalanguage' – that is, a means of describing the forms and structures of different modes of communication; and it involves a broader understanding of the social, economic and institutional contexts of communication, and how these affect people's experiences and practices. Media literacy certainly includes the ability to use and interpret media; but it also involves a much broader analytical understanding* (Buckingham 2003, 36).

Within a US context, Tyner indicates a similar division between a tool orientation of literacy and a more reflective social process in her book *Literacy in a Digital World* (Tyner 1998). This fundamental difference in the scope and purpose of media literacy also becomes evident in the positionings described below.

Towards the end of the 1990s, media literacy became connected to the term 'digital literacy' (Gilster 1997), which has since become the most commonly used term. The reason is of course the impact of digital media and a need to rhetorically raise issues of ways of handling technological developments and the role of education in our society. 'Media' and 'digital' literacies have evolved from different traditions, with the first more closely linked to media studies, and the second to informatics and technology developments. Still, these two terms have more similarities than differences in the issues raised, and in that they reflect media developments, especially in convergence. Consequently, terms such as 'computer literacy', 'ICT literacy' and 'internet literacy' are more closely linked to instrumental and narrow conceptions of the interconnection between media and literacy, understood mainly as skills in handling the technology.

In the German language discourse, the term 'media competence' receives far more attention than 'media literacy' (Baacke 1996). Similar emphasis on media competence rather than media literacy can be found in the Nordic countries (Lankshear & Knobel 2008). The word formation *Medienkompetenz* has spread in Germany from the late 1980s. Baacke connects the term communicative competence to critical media theories within mass communication, especially Habermas (Baacke1973, 333). Later, he develops this concept further to 'media competence' (see e.g. Pietraß 2007, 3). According to Baacke, media competence is the ability to include all kind of media into a person's repertoire for communicating and acting, in order to actively appropriate the world. It is the ability to use media in a goal- and needs-oriented way (Baacke 1996). Baacke distinguishes between four dimensions, each comprising further sub-dimensions: media criticism (analytical, reflexive and ethical), media knowledge (with an informational and an instrumental-qualificatory sub-dimension), media use (use through reception, offer interactivity) and media creation/design (innovative, creative and aesthetic). Against the original idea, the term 'media competence' is often used in a narrow way, being restricted to technical skills or to a solely critical media usage, leaving out the media-critical or socio-critical aspects, and ignoring the action-oriented pedagogical understanding, which is dominant in most media educational concepts (e.g. Grafe 2011; Tulodziecki 2011).

On a European level, the term 'digital competence' has been used as an overall term, and quite similar to a general understanding of media literacy as individualised skills. One example is the working group on 'key competences' of the European Commission "Education and Training 2010." This programme identifies *digital competence* as one of the eight domains of key competences, defining it as:

> *the confident and critical use of Information Society Technologies for work, leisure and communication. These competences are related to logical and critical thinking to high-level information management skills, and to develop communication skills. At the most basic level, ICT skills comprise the use of multi-media technology to retrieve, assess, store, produce, present and exchange information and to communicate and participate in networks via the Internet* (European Commission 2004, 14).

Also, as part of the term 'media literacy', many more specific terms targeting specific areas and issues have been used. Examples of this are: 'information literacy', which has been used by librarians as a way of handling information and sources as part of media developments; 'visual literacy', especially by Messaris (1994), as a discussion of ways of interpreting visual representations; and 'multimodal literacy', especially by Kress (2003) and Jewitt (2008), as more complex representations. Other writers argue for more overall conceptions pointing to the fact that there are many literacies, arguing the need for concepts that include many of the other concepts within the field. Examples of this are "multiple media literacies" (Meyrowitz 1998), "multiliteracies" (Cope & Kalantzis 1999) and "metamedia literacies" (Lemke 2004). Still, we believe that 'media literacy' covers many of the other concepts used, but there is a need to emphasise this in plural, as literacies defined within different social practices.

In his critical comment on the terminology used, and the policy initiatives within the EU during the last decade, Buckingham raises some key concerns on terminology:

> *Media literacy, it seems, is a skill or a form of competency; but it is also about critical thinking, and about cultural dispositions or tastes. It is about old media and new media, about books and mobile phones. It is for young and old, for teachers and parents, for people who work in the media industries and for NGOs. It happens in schools and in homes, and indeed in the media themselves. It is an initiative coming from the top down, but also from the bottom up. In these kinds of texts, media literacy is also often aligned with other contemporary "buzzwords" in educational and social policy. It is about creativity, citizenship, empowerment, inclusion, personalisation, innovation, critical thinking... and the list goes on… But therein lies the problem… it is a form of policy marketing-speak: it is about selling media literacy on the back of a whole series of other desirable commodities... If media literacy is essentially a regulatory initiative, digital literacy is primarily about inclusion. In the documents, digital literacy is frequently defined as a "life skill" — a form of individual technological competence that is a prerequisite for full participation in society. If you lack the skills, you are by definition disadvantaged* (Buckingham 2009, 13–17).

There is obvious truth to these conceptual reflections. However, the different understandings of media literacy are mainly connected to what perspectives and positions different researchers and reviews take in discussing media literacy.

Positionings

The fundamental differences in understanding and purpose, with media protection and individual skills on one side and social inclusion, public participation and creative communities on another, can be seen as a continuum of media literacy positions rather than as two clearly oppositional positions within media research communities. This continuum can be grouped as follows:

Effect Studies. A focus on how media might affect young people paved the way for different strategies of how education and training of 'critical viewing skills' could prevent harmful effects (Brown 1991). Over the years, this perspective has been distanced from cause-oriented and one-sided approaches, from stimulus–response approaches and from considering the audience to be passive rather than active (Kübler 2010). Elements of this perspective can still be seen in ways of conceptualising media literacy as protectionism and regulation, also related to the US-based understanding of media literacy below.

Cognitive Psychology. This has been a dominant US-based perspective since the mid-1980s, focusing on cognitive skills. Much of the research within this perspective focuses on the cognitive skills needed by media users in order to critically interpret media messages (Potter 2004). As such, media literacy initiatives have been built around procedures to enable people to make critical judgments of media messages (Brown 1991).

Critical Theory. Linked to the Frankfurt school and further developed in screen theory in the UK in the 1970s, focusing on critical consciousness. However, as Kellner argues:

> *The Frankfurt School, for instance, developed a powerful critique of the cultural industries, but the critical theorists lack theories of how one can resist media manipulation, how one can come to see through its ruses and seductions, how one can read against the grain to derive critical insights into self and society through the media, and how one can produce alternative forms of media and culture* (Kellner 1995, xiii–xvii).

During the last couple of decades, this approach has been linked to media literacy through cultural critics such as Giroux (2005, 2011), McLaren (1999) and Sholle and Denski (1994) combining critical theory with "a pedagogy of the oppressed" from Paulo Freire. Critical literacy is also included in a broader cultural studies understanding, as coined by Buckingham above (2003, 36).

Cultural Studies. Since the latter part of the 1980s, this has been the most influential perspective on media literacy, especially in the UK and the Nordic countries. Buckingham's work has been important in setting the agenda for studying young people's cultural practices as a fundamental aspect of media literacy, with emphasis on production practices combined with critical reflection. Further, this tradition has historically focused on media language, semiotics and representation and how children and youth can and do interpret or understand, share and use media messages in creative ways as part of their identity construction and social development (Buckingham 1998, 2003).

Media Bildung Studies. This has been a dominant perspective within German-speaking countries since the 1970s (Baacke 1973). It implies studying media competences in a broad sense and in association with communicative processes, citizenship, public participation and critical reflection (Hug 2011). It relates partly to socialisation theories about young people and society, for example Thomas Ziehe, and social theories like Habermas on communicative action. These conceptual developments have also had an impact in the Nordic countries focusing on citizenship and participation (Vettenranta 2007).

New Literacy Studies. During the last decade, this has become an influential perspective in both Europe and the US. It is based on classical studies in the 1980s that emphasised the need to study the social practices of literacy and the impact of different media on these social practices (Coiro et al. 2010). Partly this deals with how digital literacy differs from traditional print literacy (Merchant 2007), and partly about the visual turn in much research on practices of using digital media, for example within multimodal theories as expressed by Kress and Jewitt. This also builds on a long tradition of studying moving images within media education (Bazalgette, Bevort & Savino 1992), and on studies on creative communities like fan cultures moving into the digital age (Jenkins 2006).

Media Literacy on Different Levels

Instead of trying to synthesise or combine the positions above under similar headlines, we have further opted to present them in more detail as ways that media literacy has been used to address social issues on different levels. The first section deals with the personal level of media literacy, about skills and competences in ways of dealing with media. The second level relates to issues of social interactions and practices of media use and media literacy. The third section deals with the level of institutions and representations within media that media literacy relates to.

Personal Skills and Competences

In the reviews, the personal level covers media effects-related issues, reception analysis, cognitive skills, and critical theory. On the one hand, an agenda of protection from risks in media use and the development of critical skills through education exists (Potter 2004; Schwarz & Brown 2005; Silverblatt, Ferry & Finan 2009); on the other hand, studies discuss empowerment and emancipation as an outcome of media literacy initiatives (Livingstone 2010; Martens 2010).

Access. As mentioned in the definition by Ofcom, access to media has received considerable attention. Literature suggests that children and young individuals already possess fairly high levels of *functional* literacy, i.e. the skills and competences required to gain access to media content, using the available technologies and associated software (Buckingham et al. 2005, 3). This research has moved away from simple conceptions of passive audiences towards obtaining a closer understanding of how people interact with media (Eintraub, Austin & Johnson 2007; Martens 2010). As shown in an EU Kids Online study (Livingstone et al. 2011) and in former literature reviews, young people are generally:

> *aware of regulatory mechanisms and systems of guidance, and take these into account in seeking to make their own decisions. The large majority*

> *of young people show some awareness of risks relating to sexual dangers on the internet; although they are less aware of potential economic risks. Several studies in this area conclude that education in media literacy may be a more effective strategy than blocking or filtering* (Buckingham et al. 2005, 3).

Skills. In both policy documents and research literature, a major theme has been the skills needed to relate to different media. This goes from operational skills in dealing with the medium itself to critically interpreting media messages (Potter 2001), and users as responsible and efficient information seekers (Buckingham 2009, 18). To a large degree, the focus is on the medium or the technology itself with the implicit assumption that using the medium is inherently beneficial. Such a focus on skills is also prevalent in recent initiatives on measuring digital literacy on a European level as different levels of skills (European Commission 2011). According to Rosenbaum, Beentjes and Konig (2008, 340), "the application of media literacy has shifted over the past few years, with a greater emphasis on health-related issues" (see Kubey 2003). Here, it is often thought to be a promising alternative to the censorship of regulating unhealthy programming or limiting media use (Bergsma & Carney 2008; Byrne 2009). As this approach often comes down to activating cognitive defences against commercial persuasive content, Eagle (2007) coins the term commercial media literacy (Martens 2010, 7).

Understanding. This is also a concept that is part of the Ofcom definition of media literacy. However, different reviews and research have highlighted other related concepts such as analysis, evaluations and critical interpretations (EuroMeduc 2009; Martens 2010). In their review, Buckingham et al. reported that research literature:

> *suggests that children's awareness of areas such as television 'language', the difference between representation and reality, and the persuasive role of advertising, develops both as a function of their increasing knowledge of the world, and as a result of their broader cognitive and social development… It is important to emphasise that these areas apply just as much to fictional material as to factual material; and that critical understanding goes hand-in-hand with the development of aesthetic and emotional responses to media of all kinds* (Buckingham et al. 2005, 3).

Another take on this is research on critical media literacy. Kellner and Share (2007), for example, combine cultural studies with critical pedagogy in an attempt to expand the notion of literacy to include different forms of media culture, in order to analyse relationships between media and audiences, information and power, and address such issues as gender, race, class and power. Using similar concepts of 'critical media literacy', there are numerous examples of teaching materials and 'tool kits' on how to teach young people to become critical consumers of media. However, there is little evidence in the research literature that such programmes really have the intended consequences on media use by students (Martens 2010).

Production and Creativity. This approach to media literacy focuses more on the active participation of young people in their productive practices using different media. This has been an issue in former studies of video production among young people (Drotner 1991) or different technological tools (Buckingham, Grahame & Sefton-Green 1995). However, due to Web 2.0 technologies and different software

tools, this issue has become core in research on media literacy during the last decade (Coiro et al. 2008). There are numerous examples of how digital media represent new ways of writing and producing content, recently termed "remixing" (Lessig 2008). Creativity as a personal ability has also come to the fore as a way of expressing oneself through competences in using different media (Drotner & Schrøder 2010). Research also suggests that there is considerable potential for media to be used as a means of communication and self-expression, not least by socially disadvantaged groups; that creative involvement in media production (particularly in the context of education) can make an important contribution to the development of critical understanding; and that new media such as online gaming and mobile telephony provide possibilities for new forms of interaction (Buckingham et al. 2005, 3; Erstad, Gilje & de Lange 2007).

Social Interactions and Practices

The literature that focuses on collective rather than personal aspects of media literacy investigates media literacy as social interactions and social practices using media, activities that people are involved in within communities and societies. The three first concepts, participation, citizenship and emancipation have traditionally been linked in discussing media literacy in media research, whilst the concept of content creation has come to the fore in later years as media technology has become increasingly accessible and affordable for most people (see Erstad 2013 in this issue.)

Participation. Media-literate individuals, it is argued, take an active rather than a passive role in acquiring new knowledge and skills. In this way, they become fully able to participate as critical consumers and citizens in a media-saturated society (Kubey 2004; Thoman & Jolls 2004). Within this context, media literacy is also often linked with public access community radio and television (Higgins 1999, Wagg 2004), citizen journalism (Lim & Nekmat 2008), and more broadly, the public sphere (Fisherkeller 1999; Papacharissi 2002; Kovacs 2003; Vande Berg, Wenner & Gronbeck 2004). Another recent link here is that of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), shifting the focus on digital divides from questions of technological access to those of opportunities to participate and to develop cultural competences and social skills. This also shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement. These understandings almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking, also expressed in related concepts such as connected learning and friendship- and interest-driven participation (Ito 2010).

Citizenship. The very concept of media literacy has switched from being a mere option to being a core part of a wider Citizenship Education. This explains why the European Recommendation dated 20 August 2009 states that: "Media Literacy is a matter of inclusion and citizenship in today's Information Society... Media literacy is today regarded as one of the key prerequisites for an active and full citizenship in order to prevent and reduce the risks of exclusion from community life" (Rivoltella 2009, 44). In an age where mass media are seen as key social institutions (Silverblatt 2009), many scholars view access and understanding of contemporary media as a vital aspect of citizenship in general. For instance, Lewis and Jhally (1998, 109–113) focus on media literacy as a provider for thinking about the limits and possibilities of media systems Livingstone (2004, 11) emphasise how media literacy can reposition people from consumers to citizens, and Silverstone (2004, 48) argues that media

literacy is: "a pre-requisite for full participation in late modern society, involving as it does the critical skills of analysis and appreciation of the social dynamics and social centrality of media as framing the cultures of the everyday."

Emancipation. Traditionally, emancipation has been used as an alternative strategy to regulation. Legrande and Vargas (2001, 77) hold that "media literacy is largely about empowering underrepresented populations by giving them a language to articulate their critiques of dominant media messages and a means of producing texts that challenge the stereotypical representations of themselves disseminated by the mass media" (see also Yosso 2002; Kavoori & Matthews 2004). However, the emancipatory agenda can be seen as three intersecting projects. Livingstone explains:

> *First, equality of opportunity in the knowledge economy: in a market economy increasingly based on information and communication networks, equality of opportunity and literacy and an end to the digital divide becomes a priority. Second, active participation in a democracy: in a democratic society, media and information-literate citizens gain informed opinions on matters of the day and are equipped to express their opinions individually and collectively in public, civic and political domains, thereby supporting a critical and inclusive public sphere. Third, the agenda of human rights and self-actualization: since a highly reflexive, heavily mediated symbolic environment informs and frames the choices, values and knowledge that give meaning to everyday life, media and information literacy contributes to the lifelong learning, cultural expression and personal fulfilment that is the right of every individual in a civilised society* (Livingstone 2010, 36).

Content Creation. The role of social interaction in content creation has received increased attention in recent years. This is about how to make effective use of the myriad opportunities that digital technologies provide for creating outputs that represent and communicate knowledge and meaning in different formats and modes for different purposes, and how learners use knowledgeable others in this process. As Livingstone (2004, 8) points out: "The social consequences of these activities – participation, social capital, civic culture – serve to network (or exclude) today's younger generations." Similar issues have been raised by March (2010) in her review on *Childhood, Culture and Creativity* where she addresses literature relating to the cultures and creativity of children from birth to the age of eight (see also article by Erstad 2013 in this issue).

Media Systems and Contents

This sub-section covers the 'object of analysis' in media literacy, what media literacy is directed towards. As such it covers the whole field of media studies, of why it is important to study the media.

Content. Media literacy programmes often feature an awareness of how audiences interpret media content. Different people can experience the same media message differently. As Kellner and Share (2005, 375) quote Stuart Hall, "distinction must be made between the encoding of media texts by producers and the decoding by consumers." Martens (2010, 3) argues that media literacy studies mainly relate to four key facets of the mass media phenomenon, i.e. media industries, media mes-

sages, media audiences, and media effects. Strikingly, media literacy scholars often frame their findings in relation to contrasting applied research topics, such as active citizenship, public health, and (to a lesser extent) aesthetics. Often, media literacy researchers reason that awareness of the constructed nature of media messages is essential to a valid evaluation of media content: "Media do not present reality like transparent windows because media messages are created, shaped, and positioned through a construction process. This construction involves many decisions about what to include or exclude and how to represent reality" (Kellner & Share 2005, 374).

Aesthetics. Historically, media literacy education has often been synonymous with learning to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of mass media, especially the cinematic arts. Also, Brown (1998, 47) emphasise that an important goal of media literacy education is: "to develop selective viewers who seek out and appreciate distinctive high-quality of form, format, and content in mass media" (see also Zettl 1998; Considine 2002). By contrast, others criticise this approach for its underlying assumptions about "cultural value" (Buckingham 1998, Bragg 2006). Martens (2010, 8) points to the fact that: "apart from these few exceptions, media aesthetics seem to have disappeared from the research agenda of most media literacy scholars."

However, several scholars distinguish between media content literacy and media grammar literacy. Thus, several authors describe how "visual syntax" (Messaris 1998; Heiligmann & Shields 2005), "codes and conventions" (Rosenbaum, Beentjes & Konig 2008), "aesthetic aspects" (Zettl 1998) or "media grammar" (Gumpert & Cathcart 1985; Meyrowitz 1998) interact with content elements. In recent years, the analytical lens of "multimodality" has also become important (Kress 2003; Jewitt 2008), with clear implications for the understanding of multimodal aspects of media texts in aesthetic analysis.

Systems. On a macro level, several scholars highlight the systemic aspects as part of media literacy, as expressed by Lambert:

> *research looking into the economics, sociology, history and semiology of the media. To which markets do the different types of media belong, who produced them, which public acknowledges them and how does this public use them, what histories do they inherit, which are their languages, what are their images, what part do they play, by telling the story of what happens to us, on the public and democratic scene? The media itself is the subject of all this research, which can be transferred to form part of pluridisciplinary teaching. This will allow us to understand the media, to know how to ask questions of it in its complexity* (Lambert 2009, 38).

Likewise, Duran et al. (2008, 51) argue for a holistic approach to media literacy, "one that encompasses both textual and contextual concerns within a critical framework." They argue that the person who is truly media literate is also knowledgeable of the political economy of the media, the consequences of media consumption, and the activist and alternative media movements that seek to challenge mainstream media norms.

Institutions. In his review Martens (2010) refers to research focusing on the nature of commercial mass media institutions. According to this research, media literacy programmes must concentrate on the selectivity of the producers and the notion of producers' motivations, purposes, and viewpoints (Rosenbaum, Beentjes & Konig 2008). Primack et al. (2009) describe media organisations' financial and

political motives and the way they target specific audience markets as an essential core concept of media literacy. According to Lewis and Jhally (1998, 112): "an analysis of political economy should not be restricted to a narrow set of economic relations. The media are determined by a set of social and economic conditions that involve the key dividing lines of our culture, whether they be race, class, gender, sexuality, age, or mobility."

The three sub-sections in this part have all been important in the way that media literacy education has developed over the last three decades. Media education has addressed many of the concerns and interpretations of media literacy as a way of thinking about childhood and youth in contemporary media culture. In some countries like Norway, media literacy, or rather digital competence, has moved from the margins of the national curriculum to become one of the core issues in recent years, and is considered as important as being able to read and write. Similar transformations have taken place in Europe, in core policy documents, and in international initiatives on '21st century skills'. However, much of this transformation occurs at the policy level, with a lack of substantial research backing.

Towards a Unified Research Agenda

Rassool (1999) presents an overview of different debates on literacy during the last decades that is also highly relevant for the debates within the research field of media literacy. Her point is that research perspectives on technology and literacy need to reconceptualise power structures within the information society, with an emphasis on 'communicative competence' in relation to democratic citizenship. Empowerment is related to the active use of different tools, which must be based upon the prerequisite that actors have the competence and critical perspective on how to use them for learning and development. Literacy, seen in this way, implies processes of inclusion and exclusion. Some have the skills and know how to use them for personal development, and democratic participation for that matter, others do not. Education is meant to counteract such cultural processes of exclusion.

As the research agenda on media literacy develops at the moment, there seem to be some unifying tendencies. Although there are many approaches to literacy, there is now a consensus that media literacy is a social phenomenon as well as an individual characteristic. Media literacy is interpreted as something more than a matter of training functional skills (e.g. Silverstone 2004; Erstad, Gilje & de Lange 2007; Sourbati 2009). Literacy development is also to a large extent linked to economic growth and the development of civic consciousness and political maturity.

At the same time, researchers' positions in the media research field will continue to influence both the focus on and priorities within media literacy research. (See also Fornäs & Xinaris 2013 and Dahlgren & Alvares 2013 in this issue.) The question further becomes, with Livingstone (2008, 53-54): "What are the advantages, and are there any pitfalls, of reframing the analysis of people's engagement with media in terms of literacy?"

In our view, there are definite advantages in focusing on media literacy within media research. As the term has developed, it now pinpoints the importance of focus on the developmental needs of the individual in a media-saturated society, both to be able to take part in the public sphere and to foster creative development and social change.

The main pitfall is, however, that as long as the discourse is mainly kept on a policy level, there is a certain danger of becoming instrumental in research and measurements. As Buckingham et al. (2005, 4) remind us:

> *The nature and extent of the media literacy that individuals need and develop depends very much on the purposes for which they use the media in the first place. Different social groups may also develop and require different forms of media literacy in line with their motivations and preferences in media use. As such, we need to beware of adopting a reductive or mechanistic approach to assessing levels of media literacy among the population at large.*

We need to keep the focus on all three levels discussed in this review, on personal skills and competences, social interactions and practices and on media systems and contents. After all, the literate person lives within the literate society.

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