

MEDIA LITERACY

RECONCEPTUALIZING (NEW) MEDIA LITERACY

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to introduce a theoretical-critical approach which shall revisit elements and cast light upon subsets of (new) media literacy. It endeavours to draw community, spatial, procedural and aural literacy (auralacy) into consideration, relating them to the complex of media literacy, striving to provide invigorating insights into its conceptual foundations and integrated perspectives for its pedagogy.

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Introduction

We are in the epoch of breaking paradigms. The proliferation of media texts, platforms, activities and theories, the proliferation of media literacy calls for continuous reconstruction of core ideas and of the policies and educational programmes built on them. We are in the era of transformations and change.

It is not only media products that are variable and fluid (Manovich, 2001), but processes and procedures of media and media literacy are also in the course of constant theoretical reconfiguring. There have been shifts in the interpretation of media based economy, culture and literacy marking the phases of discovery (and rediscovery) of dynamics of society and media. With the advent of the cyberist era the West has moved from the economy of consumption to the economy of participation (Frau-Meigs, 2012). Media made societies realize the importance of informational activities and information industries and thus led to the recognition of information economy (Castells, 2000). Nevertheless research also reflected upon human attention as a scarce commodity, and urged economists to regard human attention as the new currency of business and thus to forge the attention economy paradigm (Davenport-Beck, 2001).

Theorists of new media, however, now argue for the inadequacy of both the information and the attention economy (Crogan-Kinsley, 2012) and they sketch the frame for the location economy, driven by the location, the place where people are to be supplied with information. It is the economy of the supplement of the here and now. "We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment" - as Foucault said in 1967. This simultaneity has led us to participatory (media) culture that is - as Jenkins (2008) reckons - in contrast with passive media spectatorship. It is

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an emergent culture of media where formerly separated media producers and consumers as participants interact with each other “according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands” (Jenkins, 2008, p.3). New literacies are called for and identified. “I want to learn how to write and think electronically” - says Gregory Ulmer (2004, p.10) announcing his academic program for electracy and mediacy. As Kathleen Welch insists (1999, p.104) this electric discourse, this new rhetoric is “an emergent consciousness or mentality within discourse communities, is the new merger of the written and the oral, both now newly empowered and reconstructed by electricity and both dependent on print literacy. Electronic technologies have led to electronic consciousness, an awareness or mentality that now changes literacy but in no way diminishes it.”

Technology operates to serve a location economy while people engage in a convergence culture with a new mentality and strive to accommodate themselves to their media with an inevitably changed literacy. This is the era where media literacy serves as a socializing and pedagogical programme, as an attitude of the individual and a set of skills of participants.

The ideal of media literacy

Media literacy should not be too general and it should not be too specific either. It cannot function as a defence to “harmful” media and it shall not enable anyone to be harmful through media production or usage. As a common sense of media ideologies and practices media literacy it may function as the educator of the “knowing and dialogic subject”, the individual conceived of as sovereign, rational consciousness, an author of meaning. The ideal of the literate and the media literate is the authentic thinker, the careful, elaborate and reflective analyst, the advocate of free speech, the independent community member: a true democratic citizen, a real participant. She/he is the person who knows that there is distance between the subject and the object, who is open-minded and still selective, who avoids stereotypes and goes for deeper knowledge, who acts in a dialectic and dialogic manner.

The media literate is the one who has the competence and bravery to get into contact (with media texts, objects and mediated partners), to cooperate (and collaborate) and to constitute (texts, objects and forms of relations). The theory and practice of media literacy thus calls for the individual who is conscious, responsible and active, a cultural ideal of democratic societies. As James Baldwin put it, “The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions ...” (Baldwin, 1998, p.678; Scheibe-Rogow, 2012, p.292).

When discussing media literacy and its components one is faced with the multifarious competencies and skills that describe the ethic and active media literate who would ideally inhabit the constantly changing culture of the present and the future. With its multidisciplinary nature media literacy research “is increasingly expected to integrate highly diverse competencies and skills” (Livingstone et al., 2012, p.3). Research has so far provided theoreticians and practitioners (educators) of media literacy with a multitude of new elements (competencies and skills) that build up media literacy as either an analytical or a productive knowledge (Banerjee-Kubey, 2012).

In this paper I endeavour to draw little mentioned competencies and literacies as subsets of media literacy into consideration. The theoretical-critical approach presented thus aims at further elaborating on what constitutes media literacy - especially in the age of new media - and how the elements of it shall be organized into a structured model.

Media literacy: Intelligences, competencies and skills

Media literacy is a compound of multiple intelligences, competencies and skills. According to Gardner (Intelligence shall be defined here as a computational capacity to process a certain kind of information. Humans have different kinds of intelligences which all entail the ability to solve problems and thus allow one to approach a situation in which a goal is to be obtained and a route to that goal is to be located. These different kinds of intelligences, these faculties (or gifts) of recognition and relation of the social world all facilitate meaning-making and knowledge building. Howard Gardner in his theory of multiple intelligences identifies seven types of intelligence: the musical, the bodily-kinesthetic, the logical-mathematical, the linguistic, the spatial, the interpersonal and the intrapersonal. Testified by brain research these seven types of intelligence all may be related to media as they manifest core capacities to notice, navigate, recognize, access, control and express. Intelligences as faculties provide the principle basis for media literacy. While intelligence is the capacity of the individual, competency shall mean the ability of the person. A competency involves personality traits, knowledge, commitments and skills that enable a person to adapt her/himself to a particular context and to draw conclusions from the experience gained. A competent individual is a knowing and experienced one who can meet complex demands and answer new challenges. Finally, skills may be regarded as the dexterity to adaptively carry out complex activities. Skills are acquired through training and they are integrated into competencies. As a compound of personal intelligences, cultural competencies and social skills literacy in general is a consciousness and an attitude carrying out an informed usage of "language" and a control of that use. Literacy does not simply demand the knowledge and ability to encode and decode messages but also demands applying this knowledge to social situations. As Scheibe and Rogow reckon (2012, p.268) "we think of literacy as the broad set of skills and habits that enable one to engage thoughtfully with the community and the world".

This broad set of skills (set of intelligences, competencies and skills) requires eager accessing, critical thinking, problem solving and decision making. Media literacy is the literacy customized to the multimedia age, to its agencies, modalities, codes and spaces. Most commonly defined as the skills of accessing, analysing, evaluating, and communicating messages in a number of forms media literacy involves critical analysis of media messages, evaluation of sources of information for bias and credibility, increased awareness about how media messages influence people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, and production of messages using different forms of media (Banerjee- Kubey, 2012, p.2). Media literacy, though conceptualized in several ways by scholars and practitioners, is drawn upon agreed key concepts which are the following: (1) all media messages are social constructions, (2) people who make media messages use creative languages that have rules, (3) different people experience the same media messages differently; (4) producers of media messages have their own values and points of view; and (5) media messages are constructed to achieve a purpose, usually for profit and/or power. (Center for Media Literacy, 2007, see Banerjee - Kubey, 2012, p.2). These key concepts seem to suggest that media literacy entails the recognition and acceptance of difference, the challenge for production and creativity and the consciousness of power. These key concepts base the core principles of media literacy education (set up by the National Association for Media Literacy Education of The United States; see Scheibe and Rogow, 2012) which assume that media literacy education requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the received messages, it develops informed, reflective, and engaged participants essential for a democratic society, it recognizes that media are a part of culture and function as agents of socialization and affirms that people use their individual skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings from media

messages.

Media literacy involves personal capacities, abilities, attitudes and it requires active communicative social behaviour: critical thinking and analytical skills, creative-innovative thinking and productive skills, connectivist thinking and communal skills. It is an *architectonic complex of intelligences, competencies and skills* that relates and adapts the individual to technologies, mediated messages and social situations. In response to the emergent social and technological environments - with the advent of new media - new dimensions of media literacy have been identified and described such as digital literacy and information literacy, transliteracy and multiliteracies. Digital media called for further expansion of literacies and the evolution of media literacy 2.0 that is a compound of the seven C's (Hoechsmann-Poyntz, 2012, pp.151-190): consciousness, communication, consuming, convergence, creativity, copying and community. Even though these principles and elements are fairly agreeable one may miss a systemic approach or a stratified model of (new) media literacy. That is what Selber (2004) offers in his "Multiliteracies for a digital age" (a treatise addressed to teachers of writing and rhetoric). He provides a three layered model of computer literacy consisting of functional literacy (computers as tools, students as effective users of technology), critical literacy (computers as cultural artifacts, students as informed questioners of technology) and rhetorical literacy (computers as hypertextual media, students as reflective producers of technology). The technological, the critical and the rhetorical layers seem to reflect - semiotically speaking - the syntactics, the semantics and the pragmatics of codes and messages and can also be related to intelligences as capacities, competencies as abilities and skills as activities of the individual. However, if we accept that media literacy is not only a bunch of skills (a policy), but constitute a form of behaviour (ethics) then we may add a fourth level of literacy, that of the community. Community literacy means computers as intercultural media and students as transformative agents of publics and counterpublics. As Linda Flower (2008) stresses this community literacy stands for, on the one hand, "a willingness to engage with rival interpretations, attempting to understand a problem rather than advocate an interested position". On the other hand it is "going public, choosing to stay in dialogue with alternative realities, and working to articulate their own even as they seek a new negotiated understanding" (2008, pp.103-104). Media literacy then has a technological, a functional a rhetorical and an ethical level providing the individual the route to become competent, conscious, constitutive and communicative within, with and for the media.

Subsets of (new) media literacy

New media shall be considered the complex of new textual experiences, new ways of representing, new impressions and experiences of embodiment, new relations between user and technology, new ways of expression (verbal, visual, multimedial), new patterns of organizations, production and control and new realizations of identity and social relations (Lister, 2003; Fuery, 2009; Miller, 2011). "New media" is a convergent concept of convergent and digital media technologies made up of the computer, the internet, the mobile phone, social media, digital television, and so on. Most frequently used characteristics of new media in media-lingo are digital, interactive, hypertextual, multimedial and virtual. Representations of new media answer the ocularcentrist expectations and are getting more and more visual, media objects are networked and thus organized and discovered in space, new media mechanisms offer procedures to come through and multimodal experiences call for an awareness of the aural. Although spatial, procedural and aural literacies contribute relevant competencies to new media literacies, they are rarely brought into discussion (Aczel, 2012). In the following short sections these three subsets of media literacy will be briefly dwelt upon.

Spatial literacy

In the shadow land of the visual or iconic turn a spatial turn has also occurred. Nevertheless, space still emerges in discussions as a partly enigmatic, often vague notion with malleable definitions. As spatiality can be either seen as concrete locations and forms to be mapped and interpreted, or representations of experiences of place, space in terms of rhetoric should be clarified.

Spatial intelligence, one of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences (1983; 1993) concerns the ability of thinking in three dimensions, having mental imagery, graphic skills, the capacity to reason spatially and imagine actively. From this it is obvious that spatial intelligence is closely related to visual intelligence. However, the intelligence for space includes abilities for less concrete impressions as well, among them skills for the abstract, for the schematic, for the mapped. Though visuality governs spatial practices, space has its specific requirements to be understood and answered. Conceiving and analysing a chain of links, and a network of knowledge is less a visual but a spatial competence. "Traditional" power point presentations, for example represent a sequential, linear way of meaning making, structuring and concluding. The usage of prezi-s (www.prezi.com), however, demands an awareness of space when collecting and relating one idea to another, when choosing the path to present text and images and zooming to lay emphasis. Prezi-s are buildings rather than texts and require the map of related ideas and the competence to symbolically and meaningfully represent this map. Spatial faculties and abilities of the individual add dimensions to the visual and develop structuring, hierarching, reasoning and reflective skills. Spatial literacy shall be considered a subset of the critical and the rhetorical level of media literacy.

Procedural literacy

Procedural literacy (procedural rhetoric; see Bogost, 2010) is a critical method which facilitates and improves new media literacy: the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts. Access refers to the opportunity and skills to manipulate technology, to the functional literacy users enact. Understanding is the result of critical "reading" (literacy) of media production, selection, representation and audience. Creation is the competence of active literacy that enables media consumers and users to produce mediatized messages. Procedural literacy can be relevant in all three types of literacies as it investigates and advises the processes in which operational or symbolic arguments are worked out. Procedural literacy therefore provides an additional facet to educating complex media literacy, raising the following questions (Bogost, 2010, p.258):

- What are the rules of the system?
- Who has the authorship of these rules?
- What is the significance of these rules (over other rules)?
- How do these rules manifest themselves (visually, multi-medially)?
- What claims about the world do these rules make?
- What practical and symbolic consequences do these claims may have for me and others?
- How do I respond to those claims and consequences?

As a subdomain, procedural rhetoric can function as the literacy of system-operations and argumentations that expands visual literacy. More of a rediscovery than an innovation, it identifies predominant characteristics of media technologies and thus is to be taken into consideration in understanding, interpreting and producing media

messages. Procedural literacy enriches the competencies and skills identified at the functional and at the critical level of media literacy.

Aural literacy

Discussions of the aural are almost omitted from contemporary communication and media theory; the aural dimension of new media seems to be shadowed.

Aural literacy is not identical with the literacy of music as the latter provides means of describing artistic musical compositions while the former refers to the recognition of the importance of sound in multimedia composition. Still, aural literacy is a less discussed aspect of understanding, interpreting and producing media-representation. Scott Halbritter (2004, p.225) assumes that it has been overlooked by media theorists for the following reasons: “1. our visually oriented terminology has screened out terminology for realizing the aural, 2. the information aural tools support appears, when successfully composed, to be subordinate to the visual information with which it is contextualized. 3. we have not traditionally established nor recognized legitimate aurally rhetorical ends for the conventional forms of academic compositions.”

Neglected as it is, aural literacy does not cease to offer an enriched view of media argumentation and persuasion. Audio branding (sonic branding, acoustic branding) has gained considerable significance in the field of marketing communication, recognizing and revealing the role of sound, melody, noise in making the message persuasive and memorable, the need for aural literacy, “auralacy” is just awakening. When consuming media (traditional and new) we are moving in discursive spaces in the context of soundscapes but lack awareness in decoding sound elements and processes. It is aural literacy that could provide consumers with competence to understand, interpret and represent meaningful sound-constructs. Aural literacy hence may be regarded either as a critical competence to interpret how the aural is related to the visual and verbal, or as a productive skill to strategically form sounding structures (aural genres) in the multi-media message. Aural literacy is the capacity of media literacy that “vocalizes” procedural media spaces in which sounds contextualize images and images imbricate aural experience.

Epilogue in lieu of conclusions

Both the improved, four-layered stratification model and the subliteracies of media literacy provide new horizons to discuss, relist and categorize related intelligences, competencies and skills and base integrated media literacy educational programmes. The aim of the paper was to highlight ideals, concepts and characteristics of media literacy in order to enrich the notion of media literacy as a faculty and as an attitude. Doubtlessly, in accordance with inevitable changes of our age several aspects of media literacy, its theory and practice are forced to be reconceptualised. The paper’s intellectual venture was one of the attempts to describe media literacy in a more systematic and integrated way.

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