

Leave Media Literacy to the Media Specialists

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Abstract

The world is rapidly changing and the need for media literacy, the ability to evaluate and interact with information of all types, is at an all-time high. Although the youth of America have grown up with technology and are often regarded as “digital natives”, they do not have the

necessary media literacy skills to find success post-high school. This paper explores the current state of media literacy among students in America as well as offering a solution to bridge the gap – media specialists or certified school librarians. This paper argues that every school should employ a full-time certified school librarian and that this librarian should be responsible for teaching digital and media literacy skills to their students. This paper also evaluates the NEA’s Four Cs framework as a foundation for media literacy instruction and producing students who are ready to consume and produce responsible information in the 21st century.

Leave Media Literacy to the Media Specialists

Over the past several years, through multiple elections, a pandemic, global tension, and the explosion of Artificial Intelligence, it has become increasingly clear that although today’s youth are considered “digital natives” there is a disconnect between their experience with technology and their media literacy. The American Library Association describes digital natives as students who “have grown up with internet access, depend heavily on mobile devices, heavily consume social networking services, consider speed to be among the most important characteristics of digital products and services, and multitask across devices and between work

and entertainment (American Library Association, 2014). That definition fits the reality for a majority of America's teenage population. However, the amount of time they spend connected to their devices does not directly correlate to their media literacy skills. In fact, a study conducted in 2023 actually found no distinguishable correlation between participants' time spent on social media and their media literacy (Tosik et al., 2023). Further research from 2017 showed that 82% of middle school and 75% of high school students were unable to differentiate between an advertisement which featured the logo for an oil company and a real news story (McGrew et al., 2017). The Center for Media Literacy defines media literacy as "a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and participate with messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy (Center for Media Literacy, n.d.). All students need access to certified librarians in their school to explicitly teach them the media literacy skills they need to succeed in the 21st century. Unfortunately, "a study from 2021 shows that the number of school librarians in the US decreased from 52,545 in 2009 to 42,279 in 2019—a 19.5% drop." (Wong, 2022). This data is alarming, especially when one considers that in the state of Washington a study found that "students who attend schools with certified teacher-librarians and quality library facilities perform better on standardized tests and are more likely to graduate, even after controlling for school size and student income level, and students who attend schools with certified teacher-librarians are more likely to be taught information technology skills and technology fluency skills" (Coker, 2015). K-12 students require education in media literacy skills in order to become responsible producers and consumers of information in society. So, what skills do students need and how can society and their schools address these needs?

In 2023 a bill titled S.394 - Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act was introduced to the senate. This bill defined media literacy as “the ability to access relevant information, analyze media content, evaluate the accuracy of information, and make educated decisions based on information obtained from media and digital sources” and digital citizenship as “the ability to safely, responsibly, and ethically use communication technologies and to participate in the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of life related to technology and the digital world” (Congressional Research Service, 2023). Should the Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act pass, there would be grants available “to state and local educational agencies, public libraries, and qualified nonprofit organizations to develop and promote media literacy and digital citizenship education for elementary and secondary school students” (Congressional Research Service, 2023). While this bill would be a great step in the right direction, a grant here and there is not enough. Students need consistent instruction, and all students are entitled to a relevant education, not just the students who attend grant-awarded schools or programs. In 2019, “Operation: Information Literacy” from School Library Journal surveyed four hundred and forty-three middle and high school librarians about the information literacy lessons in their schools. Although 90% of the school librarians surveyed responded that they believe “information literacy instruction is extremely important”, only 25% of respondents work in a school that has a set goal of preparing students for information research after high school. Additionally, 29% of the respondents reported that they teach information and media literacy lessons once per semester or less. Another issue raised in the survey was that school librarians needed a standardized curriculum, more resources, and more time to create lessons (School Library Journal, 2019).

In an attempt to provide a framework for schools across the country to increase media and digital literacy skills in students, the National Education Association (NEA) developed the

Four Cs in their guide titled “Preparing 21st Century Students for a Global Society”. The Four Cs are critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity and have been identified by the NEA as the most important skills for today’s students to possess before they leave high school (Roekel, n.d.). In the research titled “The Essential Skills of 21st Century Classrooms”, Dr. Suresh Babu Chiruguru outlines the importance of each of the Four Cs and how they support media literacy skills of students in today’s classrooms. Chiruguru argues that the Four Cs be adopted into curricula across the country and outlines areas to incorporate each of the skills. Though Chiruguru's assertions and research are logical, it is illogical to expect teachers to have the means and capacity to teach media literacy skills at a high level on top of their content standards. The Four Cs would be a firm foundation for a certified school librarian to teach media literacy in their school.

In another article titled “The Promises, Challenges, and Futures of Media Literacy”, Monica Bulger and Patrick Davison from the Data and Society Research Institute explore all the sides to the issue of media literacy before making some recommendations for schools to proceed. While still recognizing the state of mis and disinformation in today’s society, Bulger and Davison also present that “current research has demonstrated positive outcomes of media literacy initiatives in a number of areas: as a flexible response for both teachers and students following current events, as a method of linking critical thinking and behavior change for youth, and as a foundation for accurately digesting partisan content” (Bulger and Davison, 2018). To continue successfully providing media literacy education to students, Bulger and Davison make five recommendations: develop a coherent understanding of the media environment, improve cross-disciplinary collaboration, leverage the current media crisis to consolidate stakeholders, prioritize the creation of a national media literacy evidence base, develop curricula for addressing action in addition to interpretation. Like Dr. Chiruguru’s plans, these recommendations are valid and

valuable. All these ideals are necessary, and each researcher is working to improve the media literacy skills of the next generation. However, once again, Bulger and Davison are putting the bulk of the instruction on the classroom teachers rather than a certified school librarian. In their defense, Bulger and Davison do a better job of spreading the workload to include the whole school, and the media or society, but they do not explicitly mention certified librarians in their plan to enhance the media literacy skills of the youth population. If society truly wants to address the need for media literacy skills, each school needs to be equipped with a certified librarian to give instruction and model those skills for students.

How then should school librarians use instruction to enhance the media literacy skills of their students? Truthfully, the NEA's guide is a great comprehensive resource. Focusing on the Four Cs framework will ensure that students are being repeatedly exposed to the skills they will need for future success in any endeavor. School librarians can have the freedom to focus on each skill through a variety of activities and lessons, or they can draw inspiration from the NEA's guide. The first "C" is for critical thinking and the NEA'S guide states "today's citizens must be active critical thinkers if they are to compare evidence, evaluate competing claims, and make sensible decisions. Today's 21st century families must sift through a vast array of information regarding financial, health, civic, even leisure activities to formulate plausible plans of action. The solutions to international problems, such as global warming, require highly developed critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. In everyday work, employees must employ critical thinking to better serve customers, develop better products, and continuously improve themselves within an ever-changing global economy (Roekel, n.d.). Critical thinking is perhaps the most vital of the Four Cs and needs to be practiced. Students need to be repeatedly faced with critical thinking scenarios to strengthen their skills and sharpen their ability to discern between real and false source material. School librarians should confront students with frequent

opportunities to use reasoning, identify and analyze evidence, arguments, and claims, and interpret information through critical reflections. The second “C” is communication which is important in media literacy because not only do students need to be responsible consumers of media and information, but they also need to be responsible producers. School librarians should focus on modeling effective communication for their students and providing opportunities for them to communicate (virtually and in-person) their thoughts, ideas, and opinions respectfully. Students should also be practicing real-world communication across platforms such as, sending a professional email, filling out an application, curating a LinkedIn profile and much more. The third “C” is collaboration which is a skill that many of today’s students missed out on practicing during the pandemic. The NEA says “Generally, collaboration has been accepted as a skill that’s essential to achieve meaningful and effective results. In the past decade, however, it has become increasingly clear that collaboration is not only important but necessary for students and employees, due to globalization and the rise of technology” (Roekel, n.d.). The soft skills developed by collaboration (teamwork, flexibility, shared responsibility, and effective communication) may be difficult to measure but it’s easy for a school librarian to provide opportunities to work on these collaboration skills while working on other, more measurable, skills and benchmarks. The fourth and final “C” is creativity and in a world where so much content is being pushed out daily, creativity is a skill that will make students and the work they produce more marketable. Creativity pairs really well with communication as students should learn to create clear and unique materials. All four of the “Cs” are valuable in their own right but providing students the opportunity to practice them in conjunction would grow their media literacy skills rapidly and immensely.

In conclusion, all schools should employ a certified librarian and that certified librarian should be responsible for the information, digital, and media literacy of their students. Teachers

have too many standards in their curriculum to work through and are not able to effectively take on the media literacy of an entire generation of students. By not having explicit media literacy instruction in schools, the American society is doing a disservice to its youth and to its entire population. As the world has evolved, the curriculum has remained unchanged, and students are not being prepared for college or the workplace of the 21st century. Current trends indicate employers and university staff members report that many young people lack the necessary skills to succeed. The First Years Meet the Frames project found that students who came from high schools with certified librarians teaching digital literacy “were more comfortable than novices with their ability to credit and cite research sources at the start of their college experience. They also rated themselves more prepared for college research” (Valenza et al., 2022). Media literacy is invaluable for the future of our world and a higher emphasis needs to be placed on media literacy instruction in the education world. School librarians should focus on the Four Cs as essential skills for their students to possess and suit up for battle against the three-headed monster of mis, dis, and mal-information.

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