

Introduction

RENEE HOBBS

If you're lucky enough to have known your genetic grandparents, you may have heard stories about their life experiences, which may be entertaining, amusing, or just strange. If you're really lucky, your grandparents may shed insight on your culture and your values, reflecting the recent past as experienced in ordinary life. Once in a while, our grandparents may help us understand our own parents and even our own lives. I am lucky to have known three of my four grandparents, who were hard-working children of immigrants living in Minersville, Pennsylvania, raising families and working in the coal fields and dress factories of the region. Although I remember some marvelous stories about their struggles and adventures in the Roaring Twenties, I wish I had been able to know my grandparents better. But they lived far away, and our family had only limited contact with them while I was growing up.

My intellectual grandparents, on the other hand, are people I feel that I know quite well. Even though I have only encountered them in books, their ideas resonate deeply with my own experiences, dreams, and ideas. Because I'm an inveterate reader, of course, many authors and creative people have influenced my thinking—not just when I was young but throughout my life. I feel like I have spent the better

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part of a lifetime reflecting on the ideas of scholars such as John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Rudolf Arnheim, Marshall McLuhan, George Gerbner, Paulo Freire, Jerome Bruner, and many others. However, like many people, I'm often not even fully aware of how the ideas of others become woven into mine. I may read, view, or listen to something; embed those ideas in my own thinking; and then forget all about the original source material. The new ideas get intertwined with my own.

Personal Narratives as History

Because media literacy encompasses a constellation of competencies, different people with interests in media literacy may claim any of a number of influences. When asked about their symbolic or metaphorical grandparents, people may look to the work of humanists, philosophers, media theorists, education scholars, social psychologists, activists, filmmakers, and literary and cultural critics, just to name a few.

The identification and selection of one's intellectual grandparents is highly personal; they are those authors or creative people whose work inspires our own creative thinking, research, and ideas. Their ideas, arguments, evidence, and passions fit with the particular challenges we face, or their work speaks to larger cultural and social issues that capture our interest at a certain time; they may provide core themes, values, and ideas that bind members of a discourse community together, connecting people across time and space. Their work may even offer an articulation of foundational concepts on which both new knowledge and practical field-based programs have been built.

This book introduces readers to some of the historical roots of digital and media literacy through sixteen personal narratives written by influential scholars and practitioners who each focus on a fascinating man or woman who has served as an intellectual grandparent. In the pages that follow, you will encounter contemporary writers describing their own life histories as they describe how they encountered the writings of people from an earlier generation. The authors in this volume come from a variety of fields—including writing and composition, media psychology, literacy education, technology in

society, sociology, cultural studies, media studies, and communication arts. They all share an interest in digital and media literacy. Each has selected an author who aligns with his or her own passions, interests, and scholarly DNA. Because the essays mix personal storytelling with an introduction to complex theoretical concepts, readers may sense both the conceptual and the emotional connectedness that bind the authors to their metaphorical grandparents and gain a big-picture understanding of the many diverse, scholarly voices contributing to media literacy as a subdisciplinary field of inquiry and as a social movement. By weaving together two sets of personal stories—those of the contributing author and the historical figure under scrutiny—this book examines the origins of some of the key concepts, theories, and ideas of media literacy.

It's obvious that the power of narrative helps connect people across time and space. But, of course, ideas cannot be separated from their historical contexts or tagged narrowly to specific individuals. Historians of science have long recognized that ideas are in the air, “out there for anyone with the wit and the will to find them” (Gladwell 2008, 59). To understand the historical roots of digital and media literacy, an examination of the crosscurrents of thought at different points in time and from many different vantage points can be valuable.

Defining Digital and Media Literacy

As this book reveals, there is no singular history of digital and media literacy, because perspectives on this topic are shaped by our own personal and intellectual histories. Some scholars rely on the definition established at the Aspen Institute—“the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms”—which was collaboratively hammered out by participants who attended the 1992 Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute (Aufderheide and Firestone 1993, 7). The Center for Media Literacy offers a definition of media literacy that emphasizes citizenship and democracy, noting, “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” (Thoman and Jolls 2005, 190). In *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action*, I

emphasize that media literacy includes specific competencies, including the ability to (1) make responsible choices and access information by locating and sharing materials and comprehending ideas; (2) analyze messages by identifying the author, purpose, and point of view and evaluating the quality and credibility of the content; (3) create content in a variety of forms, making use of language, images, and sounds and using digital tools and technologies; (4) reflect on one's own conduct and communication behavior by applying social responsibility and ethical principles; and (5) take social action by working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, workplace, and community (Hobbs 2010, vii–viii).

Like members of any community, digital and media literacy stakeholders offer diverse, contradictory, and even conflicting perspectives and views. Some embrace and celebrate Internet culture and popular media and appreciate the artistry of remix creativity, while others see mass media as replete with racist, sexist, and homophobic messages and distorted representations of aggressive behavior, sexuality, and human relationships. Some frame the practice of critical analysis in terms of the economics of capitalism; others value the complex process of assessing message authority, credibility, and trustworthiness; and still others see critical analysis as a socially constructed practice of interpretation and meaning-making. Some deeply situate media literacy in relation to expanding the concept of literacy—including the practices of speaking, listening, reading, and writing—while others see the connection as more or less metaphorical. If you are looking for a simple, singular, or stable definition of media literacy, you will not find it in this book. That's because as changes in digital media and technology reshape culture, media literacy educators continue to debate what it means to be media literate. In articulating seven of the great debates in media literacy, I have noted that the media literacy community had the possibility of becoming a “big tent” of sorts, with a few overarching core values and plenty of room for diverse stakeholders with divergent perspectives (Hobbs 1998, 2011). Such coalitions are necessary for activist movements to thrive. In exploring the historical legacy that has shaped digital and media literacy and in thinking about the relationship

between the past, present, and future, perhaps we can also see it as a strong old tree with deep roots and many branches.

This book does not present an authoritative, decontextualized theory of the origins of the field. Instead, it situates the history of media literacy in relation to the lived experience of those who are now helping advance it through scholarship, teaching, advocacy, and outreach. The sharing of personal narratives that connect the present and future with the past may help people understand the entrepreneurial and often tenacious spirit that drives people's passion for this work. Historical research inquiry may help recover key ideas from across several disciplines and fields to continue to shape the practice of media literacy education in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Media Literacy History Matters

The book you are reading now was inspired by previous work looking at the early history of media literacy from the point of view of those who helped develop it. When James A. Brown (1991) identified the most significant work of practitioners, organizations, and scholars who were teaching about television during the 1970s and 1980s, he catalogued various projects of the time period but did not offer analysis of the development of the concepts, discourses, and practices of the field. Michael RobbGrieco's (2014) analysis of the complete corpus of *Media & Values* magazine, edited by Elizabeth Thoman from 1977 to 1993 at the Center for Media Literacy in Los Angeles, uses document analysis and critical discourse analysis to identify key themes in the development of media literacy in the United States. In outlining some of the current arguments inspired by the MacArthur Foundation's significant investment in digital media and learning, Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd (2015) explain that it is important to understand the predigital roots of the practices of participatory culture in a networked era even as we examine the wide array of new competencies increasingly recognized as required or desirable in digital media culture.

When it comes to the broader intersections of the study of language, images, media, technology, culture, and education, researchers have attempted to chronicle key historical moments that have

shaped contemporary practices in media education. For example, Dana Polan's *Scenes of Instruction* (2007) looks at the rich tradition of teaching about film at Harvard, Columbia, New York University, and the University of Southern California during the first thirty years of the twentieth century. Larry Cuban, a leading education historian, describes and analyzes the ways in which the use of and resistance to educational technology developed in American schools in his book *Teachers and Machines: The Use of Classroom Technology since 1920* (1986). Examining the field of writing, rhetoric, and composition, Jason Palmieri (2012) traces the history of multimodal composition, looking at the early practices of writing teachers who were inviting students to compose visual texts like photographs, film, and video. These works offer much depth to our understanding of media literacy's past.

In her online project, *Voices of Media Literacy: International Pioneers Speak*, Tessa Jolls of the Center for Media Literacy in Los Angeles conducted twenty in-depth interviews with scholars and practitioners in media literacy education from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Switzerland who have been in practice since 1990 or earlier. Interview subjects included Marieli Rowe, Len Masterman, Cary Bazalgette, David Buckingham, Barry Duncan, Elizabeth Thoman, and Kathleen Tyner. But in relation to the family tree of media literacy, I consider these individuals not as grandparents but as my American, British, and Canadian cousins. Scholars, writers, and educators such as Sut Jhally, Henry Giroux, Erica Scharrer, Art Silverblatt, Joyce Valenza, Cyndy Scheibe, Erica Austin, Brian Primack, Faith Rogow, Howard Rheingold, Doug Rushkoff, Joshua Meyrowitz, Bill Christ, Mindy Faber, Dan Gillmor, John McManus, Tony Streit, Bill Kist, Bill Costanzo, Stanley and Susan Baran, Chris Sperry, Sherri Hope Culver, and W. James Potter; activists such as Jean Kilbourne and Tessa Jolls; and media and education professionals such as Howard Schneider and Jordi Torrent have made contributions to advance the theory and practice of media literacy in the United States. Further afield, international cousins include Gerhard Tulodziecki, Keval Kumar, Divina Frau-Meigs, José Manuel Pérez Tornero, Manuel Pinto, Asli Telli Aydemir, Susanne Krucsay, Ulla Carlsson, Reijo Kupiainen, Silke Grafe, Sirkku

Kotilainen, Sally Reynolds, Thierry deSmedt, and Alex Fedorov. And a new generation of brilliant and passionate young leaders are in full flower now—too many to name here. They are initiating media literacy programs and exploring new pedagogies, conducting research, and strengthening the community, which includes diverse stakeholders such as parents, educators, scholars, media makers, public health professionals, librarians, technologists, activists, and community development specialists. We're connected by a shared passion for digital and media literacy. We've fumbled along, doing what we can do, fueled by curiosity, imagination, collaboration, and good ideas. These individuals—among the many hundreds of others not named here—helped shepherd the media literacy community through an important period of regional, national, and global growth beginning in the 1970s and continuing today. In my interview with Tessa Jolls, I shared a bit of my own life narrative as a journey of discovery stretching over nearly thirty years, describing various delights and tribulations as a media literacy teacher, researcher, and practitioner creating organizational networks, professional development programs, state-level initiatives, curricula, videos, multimedia materials, and other programs to reach K–12 students and educators (Jolls 2011). Jolls's interviews tell the story of the struggle to bring media literacy forward in the late twentieth century.

Rereading these interviews, I wondered, could we discover the even deeper theoretical origins of media literacy's history? Could the foundational humanistic and social scientific concepts that underpin digital and media literacy be explored in an approachable volume designed to help the newest generation of scholars, teachers, researchers, and media professionals? Could a book introduce readers to the many influential figures of the early twentieth century, those who were writing about mass media, technology, culture, and education even before the field of communication developed into a discipline, and well before people first began to use the term media literacy? Could it help people reflect on their own life narratives and promote metacognitive thinking about how to take action in response to those ideas that capture our imagination? Could a deep-dive look at the historical origins of media literacy inspire new and as yet unimagined possibilities for its future? In the pages ahead, a group of

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distinguished authors generously offer their insights on these important questions, taking you on a journey that is both personal and political, time-bound and timeless.

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