

# 19 Schools

**THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS HAVE FOCUSED** on the supply side of information—who produces it and how it is distributed. But what about the demand side—what kind of information do consumers seek? Ultimately, what citizens demand will affect not only democracy but the dynamics of the media market. If too many Americans do not care about or know how to find quality information, it is less likely to be produced.

Experts have focused on three related educational areas that schools (and other institutions) need to teach: “digital literacy” (how to use new technology), “media literacy” (how to assess online media in general), and “news literacy” (how to consume news in a sophisticated manner).

## Digital Literacy

Conventional wisdom asserts that Americans born during the past three decades are naturally computer savvy and digitally literate, innately equipped to maneuver in the digital world more easily and successfully than older generations. In actuality, the young people who have grown up understanding how to utilize digital technology are generally those from socioeconomic elite families, with higher incomes and more education than most Americans. But even those who are technologically savvy often lack the skills required to conduct research online, or to discern the authenticity of the texts they are reading and the sources that provided them.<sup>1</sup> Genuine digital literacy requires more advanced skills and is essential to an informed citizenry’s ability to explore and fulfill its information and educational needs in the 21st century. Cultural historian Siva Vaidhyanathan has written:

“As a professor, I am in the constant company of 18-to-23-year-olds. I have taught at both public and private universities.... The levels of comfort with, understanding of, and dexterity with digital technology varies greatly within every class. Yet it has not changed in the aggregate in more than 10 years. Every class has a handful of people with amazing skills and a large number who can’t deal with computers at all.”<sup>2</sup>

In a recently published report for the Aspen Institute, media literacy scholar Renee Hobbs wrote:<sup>3</sup>

“Many teens lack the ability to identify appropriate keywords for an online search activity, and many young adults cannot identify the author of a web page. These same children and young people often are convinced they are expert researchers because they can find information ‘on Google....’

“People use a small number of research strategies in a repetitive way even when they do not get the information they are seeking. They don’t take the time to digest and evaluate what they encounter. In many cases, students typically use information that finds them, rather than deciding what information *they* need.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a broad consensus that substantive Internet skills should be incorporated into basic K–12 educational curricula. But few K–12 educational leaders are familiar with the pedagogy and core concepts of either digital or media literacy education.<sup>5</sup> Although all states incorporate some elements into their public education systems, many teachers report that they received little training or guidance from their school systems when drawing up lesson plans.<sup>6</sup>

Because of this, media scholars and education experts have begun recommending that states give greater attention to digital literacy skills. The Center for Media Literacy,<sup>7</sup> the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE),<sup>8</sup> Project New Media Literacies,<sup>9</sup> and the Media Education Lab<sup>10</sup> all have urged state educational systems to establish digital literacy curricula beginning at the primary school level, and to establish standards to ensure that their teaching staffs are equipped to teach these skills.

In the summer of 2009, U.S. Senators Rockefeller (West Virginia), Snowe (Maine), and Kerry (Massachusetts) introduced S. 1029, a bipartisan bill to establish a 21st Century Skills Incentive Fund that would provide \$100 million annually in matching grants to public primary and secondary schools that establish digital and media literacy programs. The June 2009 press release announcing the bill noted: “74% of Americans believe proficiency in using computer technology should be a high school graduation requirement, ranking its importance just below that of reading (94%) and writing (84%); and 76% of the public support students learning to use computers at a young age.”<sup>11</sup>

## Media Literacy

Media literacy involves adapting critical thinking skills to a multimedia age. NAMLE describes media literacy as a system of “active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create.”<sup>12</sup>

More specifically, in a world in which students are constantly bombarded with messages, both negative and positive, media literacy supplies them with the tools they need to help make sense of all that information. “People today need sophisticated skills and competencies involving the ability to find information, comprehend it, and use it to solve problems. The growth of the knowledge economy is dependent upon workers who have these skills,” writes NAMLE.<sup>13</sup> Children need to critically analyze and evaluate the quality of both entertainment and information.<sup>14</sup> That means, for instance, not assuming all websites that *look* professional are credible and knowing how to tell when a site about a product is created by its producer rather than an independent third party.<sup>15</sup>

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Media literacy education aims to give students tools to learn not to take messages at face value, but to evaluate the reliability of their sources; and to understand not only what the message says, but also factors that might influence the source’s viewpoint—whether it is something as basic as the date on which the information was transmitted (e.g., before or after September 11, 2001), a different cultural perspective (e.g., many countries are not familiar with the First Amendment values that Americans take for granted, and therefore accept censorship that would outrage Americans), or potential bias, whether deliberate or not.

Media literacy education also involves learning how to create effective messages, which among other things means becoming aware that different audiences require different approaches. For example, many young people who have grown up using the informal slang associated with text-messaging are often unprepared for and even unaware of the need to switch gears for the more formal communication styles required in school and business.

Media literacy can affect people’s decisions about medical treatment or nutrition. As Renee Hobbs writes, “To get relevant health information, people need to be able to distinguish between a crackpot marketing ploy for nutritional supplements and solid information based on research evidence.”<sup>16</sup> Since the 1990s, when the federal Office of National Drug Control Policy incorporated media literacy education into student substance-abuse programs targeting tobacco and alcohol advertising, most states have included aspects of media literacy education in their health education instruction segments, as part of an emphasis on helping students understand environmental influences on their health decisions.

Training can also help people protect themselves from the negative aspects of media. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has stated: “Particularly important are the effects of violent or sexual content, and movies or shows that glamorize alcohol and tobacco use. Studies have associated high levels of media use with school problems, attention difficulties, sleep and eating disorders, and obesity. And the Internet and cell phones have become important new sources and platforms for illicit and risky behaviors.”<sup>17</sup> The AAP has endorsed widespread media literacy education.<sup>18</sup>

Common Sense Media, an independent nonprofit group, offers a Digital Literacy and Citizenship Curriculum to teach young children online safety and older kids “digital citizenship.”<sup>19</sup> Components include:

“Students reflect on how to behave ethically online.

“Digital Life Unit: Students explore the positive and negative impact of digital media on their lives and communities, and define what it means to be a responsible digital citizen.

“Privacy and Digital Footprints Unit (middle school only): Students learn that the Internet is a very public space, and therefore they must carefully manage their information and respect the privacy of others online.

“Self-Expression and Identity Unit (middle school only): Students identify and explore different ways they can present themselves online while also learning to recognize when playing with identity crosses the line into deception.

“Connected Culture Unit: Students explore the ethics of online communities—both the negative behaviors to avoid, such as cyberbullying and hurtful behavior, and positive behaviors that support collaboration and constructive relationships. They also learn about how to clearly communicate by email.

“Respecting Creative Work Unit: Students learn about the value and responsibility of being a 21st-century creator: receiving credit for your own online work and giving others respect by properly citing their work.”<sup>20</sup>

## News Literacy

News literacy, a subset of media literacy, has been defined as “the ability to use critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports and news sources.”<sup>21</sup> One recent Pew study found that 31 percent of people aged 18 to 24 had not obtained news the day before (compared to 17 percent for the population as a whole).<sup>22</sup> News habits tend to be formed early; if young people turn away from the news, it may lead to a less informed citizenry and make it less likely that there will be a critical mass of news consumers to sustain the high-quality journalism and information production crucial to a healthy democracy.

Several former journalists—motivated in part by the assumption that *valuing quality journalism will spur its creation*—have moved to create news literacy programs to help insure that young people become well-informed,

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non-gullible adults. Rex Smith, editor of the *Albany Times-Union* explained: “There needs to be an audience that recognizes good journalism even when there’s no longer a reflexive trust in the vendors of journalism.”<sup>23</sup> Conversely, a public understanding of what constitutes good journalism would help police the excesses of the fourth estate. As explained by Howard Schneider, a former editor of *Newsday* and founder of the National Center for News Literacy at the Stony Brook University Journalism School:

“The ultimate check against an inaccurate or irresponsible press never would be just better-trained journalists, or more press critics and ethical codes. It would be a generation of news consumers who would learn how to distinguish for themselves between news and propaganda, verification and mere assertion, evidence and infer-

ence, bias and fairness, and between media bias and audience bias—consumers who could differentiate between raw, unmediated information coursing through the Internet and independent, verified journalism.”<sup>24</sup>

News literacy efforts used to be a more common fixture in American education. According to Renee Hobbs, “In 1947, more than half of American high schools offered a course in Problems in Democracy that emphasized news and current events reading. Times have changed.... Today many K–12 educators believe it’s not good for children to read or view the news. Research has shown that violent news content induces more fear reactions than violent fiction, creating persistent worrisome thoughts.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, many teachers are reluctant to bring news and current events into the classroom due to today’s increasingly polarized political climate.<sup>26</sup>

Studies have shown that newspaper reading in high school contributes to reading and writing skill development.<sup>27</sup> According to the Growing Lifelong Readers study, “more than 60 percent of young adults with high exposure to newspapers in the classroom say they read a weekday paper regularly. Of those without exposure to newspapers in the classroom, the weekday readership is only 38 percent.”<sup>28</sup>

Fortunately, some journalism organizations and foundations associated with journalism have stepped into this educational breach. Founded by former investigative reporter Alan C. Miller, the Bethesda, Maryland-based News Literacy Project is a two-year-old national educational program that mobilizes seasoned journalists to help middle school and high school students sort fact from fiction in the digital age. In 2009 through 2010, the News Literacy

Project worked with 21 teachers of English, history, and government in seven middle schools and high schools in New York City, Bethesda, and Chicago, reaching nearly 1,500 students. More than 75 journalists spoke to students and worked with them on projects. Among them:<sup>29</sup>

- Gwen Ifill of the PBS *NewsHour* and *Washington Week* explained how she handles bias: “I hope you never know what I think. I’m there to provide you the information so you can decide. I have to keep open the possibility that the other guy has a point. . . . I have to be an honest broker.”
- Sheryl Gay Stolberg of the *New York Times* described how she spent the entire previous day nailing down a single name: that of the third gate-crasher at the infamous state dinner that President Barack Obama hosted for the prime minister of India at the White House in November 2009.
- Peter Eisler of *USA Today* discussed accountability: “Never trust anybody who doesn’t admit they make a mistake. Never trust anyone in life who doesn’t admit they make a mistake.”

In one memorable presentation, Brian Rokus, a CNN producer, showed the students video excerpts from a report he did with Christiane Amanpour about the New York Philharmonic’s trip to North Korea in 2008. The students got a glimpse of a country without First Amendment protections of free speech. They saw the minders who shadowed the tightly restricted American journalists. Rokus also passed around a copy of the *Pyongyang Times* with its full-page paeans to the nation’s “Dear Leader.” He then handed out an Associated Press report of a speech that President Obama had made to Congress and asked the students to cross out everything they would censor if they were the editor of the *Pyongyang Times* and Obama was the “Dear Leader.”

Another journalism organization, the American Society of News Editors (ASNE), focuses on assisting high school journalism programs. ASNE offers an online toolkit to introduce the topic of news literacy<sup>30</sup> and also sponsors the High School Journalism Institute, an intensive two-week journalism training program for high school teachers. Since the Institute’s 2001 founding, it has trained 1,603 high school teachers, most of whom continue to teach journalism and/or advise student media. One-third of those most recently trained teach at schools with minority-student populations of 50 percent or higher. ASNE also hosts an educational site at [www.hsj.org](http://www.hsj.org) and a high-school journalism website, which it touts as “the world’s largest host of teen-generated news, connected to more than 3,000 student news outlets.”<sup>31</sup>

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### **Digital and Media Literacy in the States**

While U.S. school systems are generally aware that their students need to learn computer competency, digital and media literacy has not been implemented into the curricula in any consistent way throughout the country. Some school systems may offer stand-alone courses, while others incorporate aspects of digital and media literacy into various courses, including reading and language arts, library skills, and information technology. (Those who fear that “media literacy” curricula might be used to push a particular political agenda can be comforted that these efforts have popped up all over the country, in red, blue, and purple voting districts.)

The National Association of Media Literacy Education says that all 50 states include at least some components of media literacy in their education standards for public instruction. As of 2009, only 31 had instituted standards for media literacy curricula.<sup>32</sup> Of the 19 states that have not done so, 13 reported that they intend to do so in the future; the remaining six have no plans to do so.<sup>33</sup>

In Louisiana, media literacy is incorporated into school information literacy and library media programs. The guidelines declare:

“Interdisciplinary by nature, media literacy is concerned with helping students acquire the skills needed to comprehend the messages they receive through print and non-print media outlets—e.g., TV, radio, movies, Internet—and explore the impact

of media and technology in our society. To become a successful student, responsible citizen, productive worker, or competent and conscientious consumer, individuals need to develop expertise with the increasingly sophisticated information and entertainment media that address us on a multi-sensory level, affecting the way we think, feel and behave.”<sup>34</sup>

Missouri is one of the few states to have established specific criteria for integrating media literacy within the K–12 curriculum, setting out the following requirements for reading, listening and speaking, and information literacy:<sup>35</sup>

- During Grades K–4, schools are expected to teach students, with increasing degrees of sophistication and detail, how to “identify, with assistance, topics of messages conveyed through oral and visual media.”
- During Grade 3, students are to be taught to “listen to distinguish fact from opinion.”
- During Grade 4, students are to be taught to “use details from text to distinguish between fact and opinion, to identify and explain author’s purpose,” and to “identify and explain intended messages conveyed through oral and visual media.”
- During Grade 5, students are to be taught to “analyze messages conveyed in various media (e.g., videos, pictures, websites, artwork, plays and/or news programs).”
- During Grade 6, students are to be taught to “use details from text to evaluate the accuracy of the information, to identify and interpret the author’s purpose, slant, and bias,” and to “identify and explain viewpoints conveyed in various media.”
- During Grade 7, students are to be taught to “use details from the text to evaluate the accuracy of the information, analyze propaganda techniques” and “locate and use multiple sources to evaluate the reliability of information.”
- During Grades 8–12, students are to be taught to incorporate appropriate media or technology into their discussions and presentations.
- During Grades 9–12, students are to be taught to locate and use multiple primary and secondary sources to select relevant and credible information; to evaluate the reliability of information; and to evaluate the reliability of sources.”<sup>36</sup>

Noting the wide divergence in state curricula, state education leaders around the country have made digital and media literacy part of their 2010 Common Core State Standards Initiative, declaring that students who are college and career ready must be able to “use technology and digital media strategically and capably,” employing technology “thoughtfully to enhance their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language use.” Students should be able to “tailor their searches online to acquire useful information efficiently,” be able to “integrate what they learn using technology with what they learn offline,” be “familiar with the strengths and limitations of various technological tools and mediums,” and be able to “select and use those best suited to their communication goals.”<sup>37</sup>

The process of adopting state standards depends on the laws of each state. Some states are adopting the standards through their state boards of education, while others are adopting them through their state legislatures.<sup>38</sup>

