

## ABSTRACT

**Title of Dissertation:**        **BEYOND CYNICISM: HOW MEDIA LITERACY  
CAN MAKE STUDENTS MORE ENGAGED  
CITIZENS**

**Paul Mihailidis, 2008**

**Dissertation Directed by:**   **Susan Moeller, Associate Professor, Philip Merrill  
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*Beyond Cynicism: How Media Literacy Can Make Students More Engaged*

*Citizens* explores what media literacy courses actually teach students. Do students become more knowledgeable consumers of media messages? Do students, armed with that knowledge, become more engaged citizens? A large multi-year study found that classes in media literacy do seem to make students more knowledgeable about media messages—but also found that the increase in students’ analytical abilities does not perforce turn them into citizens who understand and support media’s essential role in civil society.

This dissertation used a sample of 239 University of Maryland undergraduates in a pre-post/control quasi-experiment, the largest-ever study of this kind on the post-secondary level. The study did find that the students enrolled in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism’s *J175: Media Literacy* course increased their ability to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze media messages in print, video, and audio format.

Based on the positive empirical findings, focus group sessions were conducted within the experimental group and the control group. The students from the media literacy course expressed their belief that media literacy education enable them to "look deeper" at media, while feeling more informed in general. Yet, when the discussions concerned media relevance and credibility, the students who so adamantly praised media literacy, expressed considerable negativity about media's role in society.

Preliminarily, these findings suggest that media literacy curricula and readings which are solely or primarily focused on teaching critical analysis skills are inadequate. Critical analysis should be an essential first step in teaching media literacy, but the curriculum should not end there.

*Beyond Cynicism: How Media Literacy Can Make Students More Engaged Citizens* concludes by recommending a way forward for post-secondary media literacy education. *Beyond Cynicism* offers a new curricular framework that aims to connect media literacy skills and outcomes that promote active citizenship. With a greater understanding of the limitations of teaching students to be cynics, university faculty can adapt their courses to give students not just analytical and evaluative tools to critique media, but a focused understanding of why a free and diverse media is essential to civil society.

**BEYOND CYNICISM  
HOW MEDIA LITERACY CAN MAKE STUDENTS MORE ENGAGED  
CITIZENS**

**By**

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**Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of the University of Maryland in partial fulfillment  
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Doctoral students are often warned when they are thinking about entering into a Ph.D. program: "you must love the subject to complete this process." After four years of hard and tiresome work with little compensation, I find this love grew more than ever.

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## **PART ONE – MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION & THE ACADEMY**

### **A Note on Education, Citizenship, and Democracy**

Because democracy depends on citizenship, the emphasis then was to think about how to constitute a competent and virtuous citizen body. That led directly, in almost every one of the founders' minds, to the connection between citizenship and education.

Benjamin Barber, 2002, p. 22

The framers of the Constitution of the United States firmly believed that in order for democracy to thrive, citizens must be well educated. “I know of no safe repository of the ultimate power of society but people. And if we think them not enlightened enough, the remedy is not to take the power from them, but to inform them by education,” wrote Thomas Jefferson in a letter to William Jarvis in 1820. Scholars of media literacy have seized on that historic linkage, turning it around to read that the citizens of today must be educated about their civic roles—and the way to educate them is through the media. But media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century play multiple roles—only one of which is education, narrowly construed. Therefore the early proponents of media literacy argued that citizens—and children who would grow up to be citizens—should be taught how to “read” the media.

An informed citizenry has always been a central, though not exclusive, prerequisite for democracy. From town meetings and community bulletin boards to the advent of radio, television and the Internet, mediated information has always been a powerful means for informing a democratic public. Gregg and Nancy Brownell (2003), media scholars at

Bowling Green University, preface the importance of information and civic voice in the democratic process:

In a democracy, it is imperative that a full airing take place of divergent, even antagonistic, points of view. For that to happen, access must be available for citizens and groups to adequately present their viewpoints. (p. 2)

Michael Schudson, Professor of Communication at the University of California, San Diego, traced the notion of citizenship in the United States to arrive at what he calls the notion of a monitorial citizen—a gatherer, monitor, and surveyor of information, who “swings into public action only when directly threatened” (Lemann, 1998). Schudson (1999) argued that there is no single idea of a *good* citizen: an active participant in his or her community who votes, volunteers, participates, and believes in the public service of the government. Rather, in the present citizenship is largely a mixture of the attributes that would comprise valuable contributions to society, or good citizenship. No longer, Schudson argues, is citizenship solely based on politics. New concepts of citizenship must deal with new understandings of society, democracy, and participation.

Media are one of the “tools” that Schudson (1999) incorporates into his thinking about citizenship: “Where do the media fit with all of this? The press is not the focal point of civic life. It never was. It is a tool of civic life. It is a necessary tool. The media's main task is critique, monitoring, a watchdog over authority.” Media may not be the sole attribute for informed citizenship, but they are necessary and increasingly present in daily life. Technological advancements have allowed for increased media penetration into all facets of society. Chat rooms, blogs, cell phones, social networking sites—the Internet—have increased the amount of time individuals spend with media, and shifted the way in

which people gather and process information. This growth in digital media is at the center of new ideas about citizenship in the United States. Writes Schudson (1998): “If the new digital media are to be integrated into a new political democracy, they must be linked to a serious understanding of citizenship, and this cannot happen if we simply recycle the old notion of the informed citizen” (p. 1).

Schudson’s monitorial citizen is premised on the notion that he or she must know how to interact with information. Media education teaches individuals the skills to monitor, survey, and understand information. It possesses the capability to help citizens actively understand the role of information in their community, and the necessary existence of media for civil society. Back in 1958, Gunnar Myrdal, Swedish economist and social welfare architect, penned words that resonate with relevance to this day:

Progress has to rely on education. The individual must be made to know the social facts more accurately, including his own true interests and the ideals he holds on a deeper level of his sphere of valuations...I am quite aware that this prescription is nothing less and nothing more than the age-old liberal faith that “knowledge will make us free.” (p. 81)

Myrdal’s words, in the context of media education, reinforce the need for individuals to learn about information in a way that enables them to question the messages they encounter that inform their civic values.

Schudson is correct in stating that there is no one notion of a “good” citizen. However, one constant in society that is directly correlated with citizenship and society is education. Education is a necessary tool for the continued progress of society. Media education cannot help bring to light any of the new ideas Schudson develops for his

monitorial citizen. However, it can help people understand how the media—“a necessary tool of civic life”—influences, shapes, and enhances civic life.

### **Media Literacy and Citizenship in Higher Education**

This dissertation explores what students are learning about media. It is inspired by the core-belief of the media literacy discipline—that if people are effectively taught the critical skills to access, evaluate, analyze, and produce media (Aufderheide, 1993)—they will better understand media’s roles and responsibilities in civic life. What are students learning about media? About media’s role in society? About media’s role in a democracy? How effective are current approaches to teaching students about media’s multiple social roles? How effectively are students learning about the complexities of the media landscape?

To find out what a university-level course in media studies actually teaches students, this study utilized two specific approaches. First, an experiment measured the comprehension, evaluation, and analysis skills of students enrolled in a course titled “Media Literacy” at the University of Maryland’s Philip Merrill College of Journalism. Student skill levels were measured before and after the course, and compared to a control group, to test whether this course provided the skills that enable students to better “read” the media. As will be shown, the students from the media literacy course attained the skills commonly associated with being *media literate*.

Second, this dissertation study conducted focus groups comprised of members of both the experimental and control groups in order to investigate how students, in narrative terms, viewed media's roles and responsibilities in society. During those focus groups, students openly discussed the relevance of media to American democracy, the credibility of media in delivering diverse, reliable, and trustworthy information, and the possible influences of education about media. The focus group discussions revealed some issues—namely the effectiveness of the course in teaching both critical analysis skills and about the civic functions of media—that lead to critical questions about media literacy in the university.

The studies conducted for this dissertation found that media literacy scholars are correct in assuming that teaching skills trains students to be more critical media consumers. But the studies also discovered that media literacy advocates should not assume that students' acquisition of skills also translates into their greater critical understanding of media. In focus groups, the students from the course under study used their newfound skills to confidently express negative and cynical views about media's role in society—their messages and their motivations. These same students, however, did not speak about the essential role that a free and independent media plays in sustaining a democratic society.

The students' failure to articulate the positive role that media play in civil, democratic society could be a result of assumptions—specifically that the students already understood the value of a free press, and that if they were taught critical media analysis skills, they would not only be able to better read the media but also better understand media's vast and complex role in civic life. However, the results show that students may

not be convinced of the value of a free press, and pointing out the problems of the media only entrenches their belief that the media are just one more corporate entity out to get the maximum profits possible.

Two trends in the advancement of media literacy education can help provide context to the results of this study, which will be developed throughout this dissertation. First, with new scholarship and initiatives in media literacy growing steadily over the past few decades, media literacy advocates have often written about the skills needed to become media literate. In addition, they have written about what the acquisition of these skills can produce in students: greater engagement in civil society, greater awareness of their own environment, greater understanding of media messages, greater enjoyment and appreciation for media's leisure value, and greater knowledge of media's social roles. However, to date there have been no studies conducted at the university level to test whether such learning outcomes have been achieved. In fact few have even wrestled with how such outcomes could be measured for higher education.

The studies conducted for this dissertation suggest that it is possible that university-level students who take courses in media analysis may become more "media literate," but that they may also become more cynical and defensive towards media. Students in the study undertaken displayed little acknowledgement and understanding of media's civic and social responsibilities. As this study will show, this trend seemed to stem not from an insufficient teaching plan or the omission of any critical media content in the course, but

rather from an outcome that the media literacy field of assumes: that students need only to learn critical media skills to be media literate.

If students are exposed to repeated critical and negative media content without being reminded of the media's necessary existence in a democratic society, they may be prone to develop cynical attitudes towards the media. Traditional models in media literacy to date have focused largely on critical skill attainment. The findings of this study call for a media literacy experience not only predicated on skills but also on what increased media analysis skills should produce—aware, informed, and empowered citizens.

Second, vague guidelines and frameworks for post-secondary media educators have hindered media literacy's growth in the university. Media literacy has suffered from conflating reading media better with becoming more engaged citizens. Scholars have assumed that correlation would occur naturally, without testing how media education could facilitate civic engagement. As a result, many courses succeed in some facets of media literacy, but may ultimately not succeed in attaining the learning outcomes of media literacy education.

The University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism's *J175: Media Literacy* (J175) course, analyzed in this study, was abundant with content. It covered general trends in media (business & ownership, history, the First Amendment), media themes (global news, politics, gender, race/ethnicity, sex), and specific "mediums" (print, radio, television, the Internet). The course approached these topics in a critical way,

exposing students to the ubiquity of advertising, body image, media violence, war coverage, propaganda, public relations, political campaigns, and so on. The course also attempted to infuse in the students an understanding of their use of media and be more aware media consumers.

The students, as shown in the results of this study, were skilled in media assessment. They were able to deconstruct media in a critical and detailed manner, finding apt evidence for their media analyses. The study also showed, however, that the students from the J175 course were defensive towards media's role in society and democracy. They were suspect of the media industry, its functions, and its role in civic life.

In the J175 course, media's democratic necessity was not a central part of the curriculum or discussion. Further, most of the specific case studies used in the course exposed students to what the media had done wrong, should not do, or need to do better. The students were consequently sensitized to what media effects they must be wary of in order to protect themselves from media influences.

As a result, students were informed but cynical towards media practices; knowledgeable but reactionary to the so-called "evils" of the media; and engaged but not accepting of the complex but necessary existence of a flourishing media system in society.

This dissertation cannot claim to pinpoint the specific reasons behind the shortcomings evidenced in the results of this study. Nor can this dissertation provide any blueprints for

surefire methods of media education in the classroom that lead to both skill attainment and increased civic engagement. What *Beyond Cynicism* will do is comment on the current state of post-secondary media education through the exploration of one course that carries the title *media literacy*. By showing that students from this class, in an experimental-setting, attained critical media analysis skills, and that they expressed negativity in narrative discussions on media and democracy, this study will propose a model and guidelines for post-secondary media education that are more than mere skill attainment. This dissertation will develop and advocate a flexible framework for new educational dynamics that address media literacy outcomes for media education in an information age. It will argue that curricular reform should be rooted in making media's democratic roles and responsibilities the dominant theme of a university-level media studies curriculum. This new model is guided by the idea that, on the university-level, media literacy is based *not on specific content*. *Rather a media literacy education experience should be the application of content to specific learning outcomes.*

If media literacy is to continue to grow and flourish in the university, it must not only teach skills to effectively critique media, but also teach about the civic implications of media in democratic society. University students are the future monitorial citizens Schudson speaks of, surveying information across many platforms, not acting until they are aggravated by something they see or hear. If current media education practices focus predominantly on teaching students skills, and less on sensitizing them to civic and social media functions, students may be prone to the negative and cynical dispositions witnessed in this study. Without a sound knowledge of the role of mediated information

in society, the foundations for open, informed, and democratic citizenship will weaken. Citizens may not only lose their ability to participate in their society, but also lose the opportunity to choose whether or not they want to participate in society.

William Bernbach once said, “All of us who professionally use the mass media are the shapers of society. We can vulgarize that society. We can brutalize it. Or we can help lift it onto a higher level.” Media literacy can help hold media accountable for reaching higher levels. For it is the citizen who will demand information to be shown, and it is the media literate citizen who will be able to demand information that is credible, diverse, and independent.

### **Layout of the Dissertation**

Part One of *Beyond Cynicism* explores the current landscape of media literacy in higher education. Chapter 1 revisits past attempts to survey the existence of media literacy in the university, exposing why these attempts were largely problematic from the start. A 2002 national survey of media literacy courses in higher education reported a lack of a coherent understanding of what media literacy education is and what the goals of media literacy are for a university classroom (Silverblatt et al., 2002). To a large degree, such vague understandings of the term exist to this day. This has hindered the advancement of media literacy as an effective teaching tool for the university. Chapter 1 exposes how different uses of the term media literacy have caused some confusion as to what media literacy is and how it may be utilized in a university setting.

Chapter 2 begins to theoretically explore frameworks for post-secondary media literacy education, based on the idea that media literacy is based *not on specific content. Rather a media literacy education experience should be the application of content to specific learning outcomes.* This theory is advanced by utilizing past scholarship that explores developments in media literacy education and theory built around notions of citizenship, and empowerment versus inoculation.

This chapter also develops new foundations for post-secondary media literacy education by challenging the idea that in the university, everyone who teaches media teaches media literacy. The value of seeing media literacy as a unique approach to media education is two-fold. First, university accreditation processes are increasingly including media education in their assessment procedures. With increasing accountability for media literacy standards in universities, it will be beneficial to develop curricular foundations that will meet these new standards. Second, the idea of whether media literacy is or should be a unique educational entity can and will be debated endlessly. This research advocates a unique approach to media literacy education based on the idea that students in the present must be sensitized to media and its influences more than at most points in the past. This calls for media literacy initiatives that place such issues at the center of study, and not at the edges.

The third and final chapter in Part One introduces the study conducted at the University of Maryland, College Park. Specifically, this dissertation utilized 239 undergraduate students to address two general research questions:

Q1. How does media literacy education affect undergraduate university students' media comprehension, evaluation, and analysis skills?

Q2. How does media literacy education influence university students' understanding of media's roles and responsibilities in a democratic society?

Of the 239 student participants, 170 made up the experimental group. All of these students took the *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* course offered by the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland in fall 2006. The remaining participants formed the control group. These students were all undergraduates enrolled in courses at Maryland's College of Education.

The first research question was explored through a pre-post/post-only quasi-experiment, with a post-only control group. This design was employed to measure the attainment of media literacy skills. The second research question was explored through three focus groups. Two of the groups comprised students enrolled in the J175 class, while the third focus group consisted of students from the control group. These discussion sessions explored student dispositions towards media's relevance and credibility, and the possible influences of education about media.

Part Two of the dissertation, "A Tale of Two Halves," details the results of the data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 details the outcomes of the experiment. Five hypotheses were developed to quantitatively test the attainment of media literacy skills in the university. T-tests were used to compare average media literacy skills assessment test

scores between the experimental group and the control group. The experiment measured student comprehension, evaluation, and analysis across video, audio and print media formats. The results of the experiment showed that across all media formats, the students in the J175 course increased their ability to critically read media.

Chapter 5 details the results of three focus group sessions conducted for the study. In both of the experimental focus groups, students expressed negativity towards how media function in society, and about the amount of relevant, diverse, and trustworthy information media provide to individuals in society. They were quick to criticize, discredit and discount media outlets for their lack of credibility at any available point in the conversations. The control group, on the other hand, was less quick to discredit and attack the media for its apparent failings. But their discussions, while less negative, were also of less depth and rigor than the experimental groups. While lacking some basic knowledge about specific media functions—business models of media, newscast operations, ratings, and specific examples of media manipulation—the control group’s discussions about media’s credibility and relevance to society often brought about both negative and positive points about media functions in exploratory and rather broad topic discussions.

The differences noticed between the experimental and control group students led to the idea that while the J175 class was effective in teaching critical skill attainment, it perhaps failed to give students an understanding of media’s role in civic life. As evidenced by the focus group sessions, critical skills can be channeled as negativity towards the media,

rather than an understanding of how the media is also a necessary tool for democratic citizenship. It is this specific finding in the study that led to the formation of a template for teaching media in a way that both increases media skills and increases an understanding of the media's larger functional roles in civic society.

Part Three of this dissertation offers a series of provisional guidelines and platforms for university-level media education. Chapter 6 presents a developed post-secondary media literacy framework, consisting of a definition, model, and guidelines for media educators. The definition and model for post-secondary media literacy education are not meant to be definitive, dominant, or concrete. Rather, they were constructed to serve as resources from which progressive steps towards successful media literacy outcomes can be made. Five classroom guidelines for media educators are also offered to help foster media literacy practices that can focus on both skills and civic understanding in the university. The conclusion section offers some considerations for the future of post-secondary media literacy education. These include curricular and administrative suggestions meant to begin constructive dialog about media literacy's growth in the university.

It is the belief of this researcher that democracy depends on an informed and aware public. It is also the belief of this researcher that in the present, media have become the means by which individuals know about anything beyond what they witness firsthand. In light of such an environment, teaching about media is more important now than ever before. If students can understand media's core functions they can better understand how information originates and is distributed, and its larger civic implications. Higher

education, as the last stop in the formal education process, must continue to increase its attention to this need. If students are not provided the proper education to effectively engage with media, they may run the risk of falling short of the civic duties society asks of them.

Post-secondary media literacy is only one way to help ensure the continued preservation of citizenship. However, few can argue that it is now more relevant than ever before.

### *A Note on Terminology*

Many of the terms used in this text have multiple meanings and can be conceived differently depending on their context and interpretation. Throughout this dissertation, certain terms are used in lieu of this study's intended outcomes. In this regard, the following definitions and explanations of terms should help clarify their use throughout this text.

*Civic Information* – This term refers to information with political, social, economic, or democratic implications. This is not termed “news” because in the current media climate, students are educated about civic issues through many more avenues than news media.

*Engaged Citizenship* – Taken here to mean how individuals understand the information process. This includes how information is created and distributed, and the intended influences and nuances of mediated information.

*Informed Citizenship* – The term builds on Schudson’s initial notion of informed citizenship, as noted in Henry Jenkins’s (2006) glossary in *Convergence Culture*: “[the ability] to access all of the available information on a matter of public policy before reaching a decision” (287). However, the term here is used in a broad and holistic way to include understanding how information contributes to the civic process. In this way, being an “informed” citizen is not limited to the idea of information gathering, but also pertains to monitoring information, critically reading information, and intelligently processing information.

*Media* – From David Buckingham (2003): “The term *media* includes the whole range of modern communications media: television, the cinema, radio, photography, advertising, newspapers and magazines, recorded music, computer games and the internet.” (p. 3). This text does not separate media from mass media, new media, multimedia, news media, entertainment media, and so on. Buckingham further comments about the use of media: “All these media are equally worthy of study, and there is no logical reason why they should be considered separately.” (p. 4). Young adults rarely differentiate these types of media, and furthermore, informed citizenship is not simply based on knowing a certain type of media. Civic information is packaged in all forms of media. Young adults often gather civic information through numerous information avenues. Differentiating them is counter to the climate of the subjects targeted in this text.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this use of the term media, see Henry Jenkins’s, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, (NYU Press, 2007)

*Media Education* – Also from Buckingham (2003), “media education therefore aims to develop a broad-based competence, not just in relation to print, but all in these other symbolic systems of images and sounds...the process of teaching and learning about media: media *literacy is the outcome*—the knowledge and skills learners acquire” (p. 4).

*Media Literacy* – The use of this term is based on the common U.S. definition, born at the Aspen Institute Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, that reads as the ability to “access, analyze, evaluate and produce both print and electronic media” (Aufderheide, 1993). This term is not advocated to be a specific discipline or separate field of work, but rather a specific way to teach media that includes certain outcomes: awareness, understanding, and reflection. For the purpose of this study, the end goal of media literacy is the aware and informed citizen (see definitions above).

*Post-Secondary Media Literacy* – This term is used throughout the text to refer to media literacy education beyond K-12. Primarily, it refers to the university, but the theories discussed in this study may also be adapted to adult education learning.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE STATE OF MEDIA LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

#### Problems Locating Media Literacy in the Academy

In 2003, Penn State Professor Patricia Hinchey reflected on her experience when being asked to teach media literacy:

It was so last year when, after several years of teaching not only traditional composition and literature courses but also educational philosophy and methods courses, I found myself teaching media literacy to undergraduate and graduate students. During the course of the year I learned that invariably when a colleague asked “What are you teaching this year?” and I answered “teaching media literacy,” I could anticipate the follow up question, “What is Media Literacy?” (p. 268).

Hinchey’s story is indicative of media literacy’s current existence in U.S. higher education. Difficulties in both defining and locating media literacy initiatives in the university have often led to vague and disparate conceptions of the term. As a result, media literacy education’s potential value to higher education has been constrained by its intricacies both as a construct and discipline (Christ and Potter, 1998).

Central to media literacy’s tenuous post-secondary status is the issue of consistency. Specifically, definitional inconsistencies have led to marginal and often contested notions of media literacy for the university. This has ultimately hindered media literacy’s ability to produce tangible and coherent learning outcomes for higher education. Three general trends inherent in media literacy have contributed to such inconsistencies.

First, since its introduction in the United States in the early 1990s, media literacy implementation across all levels of education has lagged significantly behind other major English-speaking countries in the world (Kubey & Baker, 1999). This stagnation has stemmed predominately from a decentralized U.S. education system. Nations that, decades ago, enjoyed top-down centralized educational bodies were more successful in adopting national media education standards and initiatives.<sup>2</sup> This is evidenced by successful media literacy initiatives in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, the United States has struggled to build and successfully implement media literacy initiatives on all levels of education. Media literacy advocates will point out that all fifty states have adopted standards and parameters for the existence of media education in K-12 education. These parameters, however, have little in common with one another. Nor do they share much with the specific teaching and learning parameters advocated by media literacy.<sup>4</sup> While new state-led media literacy initiatives have increased the overall exposure of media literacy, its progress in the United States continues to struggle (Galician, 2004).

Second, the majority of media literacy teaching initiatives and scholarship has been geared towards K-12 education (Hobbs, 1998). This has done little to spur the expansion of media literacy in higher education. Two main reasons have inhibited spill over from

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<sup>2</sup> While these countries have since decentralized education to an extent, their initial strides in media education are still reflected in their standards and requirements for media literacy in secondary level education.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A for the origins of media literacy in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> More information on specific state initiatives to adopted media education in their system can be found at [http://www.frankwbaker.com/state\\_lit.htm](http://www.frankwbaker.com/state_lit.htm)

K-12 education into the university. First, post-secondary teachers largely construct and implement their own curricula. Pending administrative approval, college-level educators are generally free to teach with the content they find most effective and with classroom techniques that personally suit their teaching style. Second, the newness of the term “media literacy” has been met with considerable academic resistance. Teachers and administrators seem wary to adopt a “loaded” term with little concrete foundation as an educational concept & teaching method for the university. As will be illustrated below, such resistance has led to vastly different interpretations about what constitutes media literacy education in the university, including where it should be taught, how it should be taught, and who should teach it.

Third, the existing definition of media literacy is premised on rather broad and figurative terminology. In the United States, media literacy is commonly referred to as the ability to “access, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media” (Aufderheide, 1993). While this definition has solidified the existence of media literacy in K-12 education, it provides little guidance as to how these terms should be conceived in the university—specifically in terms of teaching techniques and learning outcomes.

As a result, media literacy has adopted numerous roles across many academic disciplines in the university. While such definitional vagueness is not necessarily negative for post-secondary media literacy, it has compromised, to an extent, the learning outcomes media literacy claims to teach.

The practical and conceptual growing pains of media literacy can be evidenced in recent attempts to locate media literacy curricula and/or initiatives in higher education. These explorations have exposed the convolutions that continue to marginalize media literacy, both in terms of its existence in the university and its effectiveness as a teaching tool.

### **Past Attempts to Measure Media Literacy in U.S. Higher Education**

Despite the general lack of attention paid to post-secondary media literacy education, two past explorations have attempted to locate its existence in higher education. Both studies were not methodologically or empirically rigorous, and encountered some difficulties in their investigations. Nevertheless, these attempts highlight some of the core inconsistencies apparent in surveying a field with no common platform for the university.

#### ***2002 – Silverblatt’s Attempt<sup>5</sup>***

The most significant attempt to locate media literacy in the university occurred in 2002. Art Silverblatt, Professor of Communication and Journalism at Webster University in St. Louis, with a team of media educators and scholars, drafted and electronically disseminated a survey that attempted to “identify the breadth and depth of media literacy courses in institutions of higher education across the United States” (Silverblatt et al., 2002). The team sent 3,200 email messages to journalism, media, communication, education, and other departments in universities, colleges, and community colleges across

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<sup>5</sup> The researcher of this study was told that a study by the same team that conducted the 2002 attempt was conducted in 2007 by a graduate student of Silverblatt’s at Webster University. However, no information has been released on this study, and the researcher has been unable to secure more information about this study.

the United States. They also posted the survey to their website and conducted some primary research into schools and colleges.

Of the 3,200 emails the team sent, they received 74 responses. Based on these responses, Silverblatt et al. reported that sixty-one universities across the United States offer media literacy in their institutions: thirty-four offer it as a separate course, and twenty-seven claim it is integrated across their curriculum (Silverblatt et al., 2002).<sup>6</sup> Master’s degrees with concentrations in media literacy are offered at five institutions, and three doctoral programs offer a designated media literacy option (see Table 1). The courses or contents lie predominantly in schools of communication, but can also be found in teacher training programs, and English and education departments.

**Table 1**

<b>Media Literacy Degrees Offered in the United States*</b>	
<b><u>Undergraduate</u></b>	<b><u>Doctoral</u></b>
Webster University in St. Louis	New York University Rutgers University University of Alabama
<b><u>Masters</u></b>	<b><u>Certificate</u></b>
Appalachian State University New School Rutgers University Southern Illinois University Webster University	Southern Illinois University University of Dayton University of Massachusetts-Boston
*As reported by faculty from these institutions in 2002	
Source: <a href="http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/survey/survey_Report.htm">http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/survey/survey_Report.htm</a>	

<sup>6</sup> These numbers have probably risen in the recent years. However, difficulties in defining whether media literacy exists in a program or not, and a lack of subsequent studies exploring this topic make these statistics the most recent and reliable.

In spite of the increasing frequency of new media literacy initiatives in the university, some haziness still exists about whether or not higher education institutions are committed to acknowledging media literacy and offering it in their curriculum (Silverblatt et al., 2002). Silverblatt et al. (2002) found that “there appears to be considerable confusion within the higher education community about what media literacy is and what makes up a media literacy curriculum.”

Two specific themes highlight the general indistinctness to media literacy evidenced in the Silverblatt study. First, there seemed to be an active resistance to the basic idea of media literacy. Noted Silverblatt et al. (2002): “A respondent from the University of Hartford commented, ‘A small number of faculty still cling to the notion that studying media and pop culture is not a serious or worthy academic pursuit.’” Second, there seemed to be a general confusion about the definition of media literacy.

Silverblatt’s team encountered the core difficulties inherent in locating a new and rather complex term: without a clear understanding of what media literacy is and how it works in higher education, departments and educators reported media literacy’s existence based on however they personally conceived the term’s meaning. The natural outcome of this scenario is an educational framework compromised by a general lack of common understanding.

The disparate definitions of media literacy are not found in competing texts or by scholars arguing over the core purpose of the media literacy education movement. Rather,

they stem from the theoretical looseness of the term itself. “Media literacy” is quite easily adaptable in many different academic disciplines and for many different academic pursuits. While this is in no way negative, it may compromise the learning outcomes defined by the media literacy field over the last few decades. Evidence for this result can be seen in the responses to the Silverblatt team’s survey, and the wide adoption of the term to fit personalized academic agendas.

In conclusion to their survey, Silverblatt et al. (2002) mentioned that a network for media literacy educators in the university and a list for students interested in media literacy could be born from such a survey. Silverblatt is correct in stating that his survey represents a start for dialogue about media literacy in post-secondary education. However, this dialogue may be as wide-ranging as the responses to the team’s survey questionnaire. If there are no parameters for media literacy’s existence in higher education, discussions may only further widen the already vast and marginalized existence of media literacy education.

#### ***2004 – Maryland’s Attempt***

A second attempt to locate media literacy in higher education occurred in the spring of 2004. University of Maryland Professor and Dean Emeritus Ray E. Hiebert and the author of this dissertation surveyed journalism and mass communication programs across the United States, inquiring about the existence of media literacy education in journalism and mass communication programs, and how media literacy was perceived by deans/directors of studies at 48 journalism and mass communication programs around the

country. Surveys were sent to deans/directors of studies at journalism and mass communication programs that offered both undergraduate and graduate degrees.<sup>7</sup>

While this study did not attempt to inquire about media literacy across all higher education, its results were indicative of the struggles media literacy encounters in the university.

The open-ended survey asked the participants how they viewed media literacy, if it existed in their curriculum, and how they envisioned it as a curricular and educational tool. The survey also asked the participants to attach in their reply any evidence of the existence of media literacy in their program, i.e. syllabi or curricula. After approximately sixty-percent of the survey questionnaires were returned, follow-up phone conversations were conducted with randomly selected participants. While the results were useful in providing a general overview of how journalism and mass communication programs view media literacy in general and as part of their curricula, they were far from encouraging.

The researchers were met with pessimism towards media literacy. The respondents' negativity was exemplified by three general criticisms. First, the respondents were critical of a survey asking about media literacy in journalism and mass communication education. One respondent went so far as to call the survey, and media literacy, "irrelevant." Second, many respondents balked at the survey, saying their programs already taught media literacy. Ironically, the first question on the survey asked the participants to define media literacy and attach any current examples of media literacy

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<sup>7</sup> The 2003 *AEJMC School Directory* was used to locate all the programs offering both undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in journalism or journalism and mass communication/media.

curricula in their program. Those ten or so respondents who believed they already “did” media literacy offered very few definitions or working examples of its existence in their curricula.<sup>8</sup> Third, most respondents were negatively disposed to adopt what one director of studies deemed “a fifty-cent term with no place in professional education.” The overall tone was negative and occasionally hostile towards what most deemed a “useless” endeavor.

Of the returned questionnaires only two participants believed in the efficacy of media literacy education, elaborating on its place in their curriculum and its importance to their program. Wrote one professor from a large mid-western university:

I personally believe that issues of media literacy are exceptionally important both to society and to the academy, and offer both a responsibility and an opportunity for J/MC education. In the “information age,” media literacy may be a more important survival skill than the other more traditional literacies of reading, writing and arithmetic, because of the pervasive reach and influence of the messages consumed constantly by all of us, from the earliest age to death.

While this reply was both positive and reinforcing, it was far from the norm. Based on the general resistance to media literacy education evidenced by this study, the researchers concluded that the idea of media literacy, and its educational frameworks, remained unfamiliar to journalism and mass communication educators.

This study was further plagued by what the Silverblatt team encountered two years earlier. Many university educators were resistant to a term they were unfamiliar with. In the Silverblatt et al. study, this led to reporting of media literacy that ran the gamut of

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<sup>8</sup> As with the 2002 Silverblatt et al. study, this study may have also benefited from offering a definition of media literacy in the survey.

possible media and communication courses. In the Maryland study, this resulted in a general hostility to both the term and its educational framework. One professor from a southwest state university wrote in the comments section of the survey: “not sure what you mean by media literacy. A definition would have helped.” Another director of studies had a personal assistant call the researchers and request a definition for media literacy and some examples of how it is used in other departments. After this conversation, the researchers never heard from the participant or the assistant again.

The participants in the Maryland study were rather resistant to discussing an initiative with no definition or common understanding. They may have been irked by the thought of another “academic” term entering a discipline focused on training professionals and future media practitioners.

### ***A Mirror Study in Sweden Raises more Questions***

Spurred by the negative reaction to the Maryland study, the author of this dissertation conducted a mirror-study in Sweden in the summer and fall of 2004, while posted as a guest researcher at Stockholm University’s Institute of International Education. The exact same survey used in the Maryland study was distributed to thirteen schools of Journalism, Media and Communication in Sweden. The return rate was 92%. The results were in marked contrast to what the Maryland inquiry found, evidenced by two main themes that emerged from the responses:

1. Acknowledgement of the importance of media literacy as a concept and initiative for higher education, and;

2. The importance of media literacy's existing or soon to be integrated inclusion in their departments and/or programs (Mihailidis, 2006, p. 422).

The Sweden study's results were intriguing. Why was Sweden so knowledgeable about media literacy? Why were they praiseworthy of not only media literacy education's existence in their curricula but also of its existence as an educational movement in general? Why was there no resistance to the inquiry itself? Data show that Sweden, compared to other OECD countries, invested considerable resources into education. The outcome is a general population comparatively well-off in terms of education and skills (Bjorklund et al., 2005). Sweden has a reputation for its progressive educational initiatives and robust educational system. However, this should not serve as an excuse for the results of this study, which contrasted the results found in the United States.

The Swedish study concluded by offering advice to U.S. media literacy educators in the university: "For U.S. academics to acknowledge media literacy to the extent exemplified in Sweden, they must be exposed to how media literacy as a citizen-empowering entity can offer added-value to a curriculum" (Mihailidis, 2006, p. 424). The results of the Swedish study further reinforced the need for basic media literacy frameworks and parameters in U.S. Higher Education.

To date, few rigorous attempts have investigated the existence of media literacy initiatives in higher education.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, new media literacy initiatives in the

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<sup>9</sup> The *Media Literacy Online Project*, hosted by the "Center for Advanced Technology in Education" at the University of Oregon, Eugene, hosts one of the most comprehensive media literacy clearinghouses

university continue to emerge. If these new initiatives are not implemented with sound and structured understanding, the same inadequacies evidenced in 2002 and 2004 will continue to hamper media literacy's existence in the university.

### **A Snapshot of Media Literacy in Higher Education**

The summation that follows highlights the interesting similarities and differences in existing media literacy degrees, programs, and courses in U.S. higher education.<sup>10</sup> Inconsistencies in both defining media literacy and applying it to post-secondary curricula have exposed its current inadequacies in higher education. These shortcomings were specifically noticed by unintended and occasionally egregious misapplications of the term by many who responded to the 2002 and 2004 surveys.

#### ***Programs***

The 2002 Silverblatt et al. study reported that six institutions offered specific concentrations in media literacy, while three others offered a certificate in media literacy.<sup>11</sup> Browsing through the degree and program requirements reported by these

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currently available (see: <http://interact.uoregon.edu/mediaLit/mlr/home/>). Among their vast resources, a section titled "courses in media literacy" lists fourteen schools that currently offer courses or degrees in media literacy. Of the fourteen, seven are in the United States, and all are listed in the Silverblatt survey. This provides further evidence that the Silverblatt study of 2002 still remains useful as a reference for media literacy in the university.

<sup>10</sup> This snapshot consists of information taken from Silverblatt's study, the 2004 attempt to assess current media literacy in journalism and mass communication programs, and general research into new media literacy courses and/or initiatives in higher education conducted in summer 2006. The most recent investigation was based on searching programs that adopted the actual term "media literacy" in their curricula.

<sup>11</sup> In 2007, it is safe to assume that the number of programs believing to offer media literacy has grown. However, the 2004 exploration and the research conducted for this dissertation could not locate any new programs offering media literacy degree tracks in the United States beyond what the Silverblatt team found in 2002.

institutions in 2002, there were no significant attributes of their curricula that could separate these programs as teaching “media literacy” from programs that do not.

However, most programs reported in the study included some aspects of media literacy skills—access, analysis, evaluation, comprehension, production (Aufderheide, 1993; Masterman, 1985)—the core concepts of media literacy as stated in the common U.S. media literacy definition of 1993. That the programs listed in Silverblatt’s 2002 study address media literacy specifically was most likely due to the fact that these programs are directed by those defining and largely directing the field. Therefore, these programs are both the standard for the existence of media literacy in the university, and the sole examples of media literacy programs in the United States. On the surface, these programs do not reveal what makes media literacy a unique post-secondary educational teaching tool in their programs. Until they and other post-secondary media literacy scholars do, locating existing initiatives and curricula will remain both difficult and rare.

### ***One Undergraduate Program***

Webster University in St. Louis offers a Bachelor of Arts in “Media Communications with an Emphasis in Media Literacy.” This is the only known program in the United States to include the term media literacy in its undergraduate degree title.

The mission statement for the media literacy emphasis reads:

The emphasis in media literacy consists of the following areas of study: an awareness of the impact of the media on the individual and society; an understanding of the process of mass communication; the development of critical approaches with which to analyze and discuss media messages; an awareness of media content as a "text" that provides insight into our contemporary culture and ourselves; an awareness of the depiction of diverse groups within a culture by the media; and the cultivation of an enhanced enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of media content (Webster University, 2005a).

Webster's media literacy concentration offers courses in ethics, cultural diversity, law, media economics, politics, and international criticism. Practical coursework includes media writing, video production, media technology, and media fieldwork. If one were to attempt to distinguish what makes Webster's curricular offerings specific to media literacy, he or she would be hard-pressed to differentiate them from many other general media studies programs. There is no course, title, or content that distinguishes the curricula as specific to media literacy education.

Webster's mission statement, however, is indicative of the complexities involved in attempting to isolate media literacy programs from general media studies programs. This statement was compiled by a scholar(s), Art Silverblatt, who is familiar with the intended outcomes of media literacy education, having written multiple definitive texts on media literacy and conducted the 2002 survey mentioned above. Thus, common media literacy outcomes are noticeable, including: "understanding the process..., the development of critical approaches..., an awareness of diverse groups within a culture..., and the cultivation of an enhanced enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation..." These terms and phrases signify engagement with media. They go beyond analysis and exploration, towards a critical cultivation of understanding. They stress awareness and reflection through connecting critical skills to an understanding of media's social and democratic functions.

Webster's program is quite representative of a general media/mass communication degree track. Yet the mission statement places the purported outcomes of a media literacy educational experience in the context of the program. Webster's curriculum is specifically oriented around the advocated results of a media literacy educational experience: awareness, engagement, understanding, production and enjoyment. How such learning outcomes are taught in the classroom, however, is both difficult to tangibly measure and rarely a topic of conversation.

***Graduate Programs: Master's & Ph.D.'s***

The Silverblatt team's study reported five schools offering master's degrees with concentrations in media literacy, and three doctoral programs offering a designated media literacy option. The five master's degree programs (see Table 2) are significantly different in curricular offerings and program goals. Of the five programs, three—Appalachian State, Rutgers and Webster—house leading academics and scholars in the media literacy field. These three programs, consequently, reflect similar mission statements, course organization, and intended outcomes.

Both Appalachian State and Webster use the term “media literacy” in their program titles. While Appalachian State's program is based more on educational and curricular theories of teaching media, and Webster's tends to approach media literacy through a political-media lens, both programs' course listings cover culture, economics, media production, media criticism, and media literacy. Webster offers fieldwork courses, while Appalachian State offers credit to students who attend conferences or involve themselves in service-learning activities revolving around media literacy.

Both programs claim to apply a media literacy framework to a media studies degree, as seen through their mission statements. Webster's (2005) states:

This emphasis examines the cultural, political, and economic context of media, which affects media programming. The media literacy emphasis focuses on research strategies for the systematic analysis of content and provides opportunities for fieldwork experiences in different sectors, including education, community, professional, and media arts.

Appalachian State (2007) similarly writes of its Master's program:

The media literacy concentration develops the technical and intellectual skills to successfully utilize and critique traditional and emerging mass media formats and information technologies. Particular emphasis will be placed upon the impact and influence of media content and format on school and society, students and citizens. Attention will also be given to the subject of media audiences and media ownership. Graduates of the program will be prepared to foster media literacy initiatives, projects and curriculum development in a variety of educational settings.

These statements are the means for distinguishing the "media literacy" concentrations in the programs. Browsing courses and course syllabi offers little evidential differentiation between these programs and general Master's degrees in media, communication, or journalism studies. The only parameters from which to judge the existence of media literacy in these programs are the brief program descriptions and the faculty attached to the departments.

Rutgers University also houses a Master's degree that was reported to teach with a concentration on the skills and dispositions advocated by media literacy. Rutgers mission statement includes no direct mention of media literacy. Rather, its degree requirements include a vast array of different media and communication courses. Nevertheless, within

the Rutgers course layout one media literacy course exists, presumably taught by the faculty member who is a well-known and visible media literacy scholar. Beyond that however, little prose specific to media literacy exists within the course layout, description, or mission statement of the degree.

**Table 2**

<b>Master's Degree Granting Programs in Media Literacy – U.S.*</b>
<b>The New School-</b> Master's of Arts in Media Studies
<b>Appalachian State University</b> – Master of Arts in Educational Media (titled: Media Literacy)
<b>Webster University in St. Louis</b> – Master of Arts in Media Communication with a concentration in Media Literacy
<b>Rutgers University</b> – Master of Communication & Information studies
<b>Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville</b> – Master of Arts in Speech Communication
* Programs were self-reported to offer media literacy master's degrees in 2002.
Source: <a href="http://www.webster.edu/media-literacy/survey/survey_Report.htm">http://www.webster.edu/media-literacy/survey/survey_Report.htm</a>

The New School and Southern Illinois University, on the other hand, do little to advertise the media literacy concentrations they reported to offer in their programs. While there can be no logical dispute against their inclusion as programs offering media literacy curriculum, they have no specific mention of the specific learning experiences, skills sets, and educational philosophies of the media literacy field.

The New School's Master's of Art in Media Studies is predominately production focused. In addition to production across all media formats, it offers theory courses in media history, cultural studies, media criticism and analysis. Its course syllabi cover

different media and issues in the media through political, economic, social, and cultural lenses. The New School's curriculum is in fact quite similar to Webster, Appalachian State, or most media programs for that matter. The only noticeable difference, on the surface, is that the essential features of a media literacy curricular experience—engagement, awareness, and critical understanding of media—are not mentioned in the New School's program. Also, the only skills mentioned are in light of what students will learn in media production courses. That does not mean such attributes do not exist. This is one difficulty inherent in attempting to locate media literacy attributes in the university. Using course descriptions to find certain signifiers of media literacy learning outcomes is inadequate at best.

Southern Illinois offers even less evidence of media literacy in its curriculum. It offers a Master's in Speech Communication with no mention whatsoever of media literacy attributes. The curricula and overview offer no key insights or descriptors alluding to the tenets of media literacy education.

The doctoral offerings at Rutgers University, New York University, and the University of Alabama consist primarily of one or two courses that doctoral students may opt to take if they wish to concentrate in a media-related field. New York University, for example, offers media literacy and art courses in its Department of Art. Rutgers offers a doctoral program in Communication, Information and Library Sciences, in which students can pursue a concentration track in media studies. This concentration offers courses in media literacy, media and history, media and politics, and media and culture. The University of

Alabama offers a doctoral degree in communication studies. The program is designed to take from each of Alabama's divisions within its School of Communication and Information. Courses include everything from journalism to library science and information systems. While Alabama mentions nothing specific about media literacy, its curriculum offers such an array of media courses that, if taught in a "media literacy" manner, could easily fall under the media literacy umbrella.

The doctoral programs, like in most institutions of higher education, are highly specialized towards the aims of their individual universities. They are not easily distinguishable from any other doctoral programs in communication, media, and journalism. Other than Rutgers offering one course titled "Media Literacy," all three doctoral degree tracks offer little evidence of existing media literacy attributes.

### *Courses*

Self-reporting media literacy courses in the university has exposed the same ambiguities apparent in the program parameters. In the 2002 investigation, 61 universities reported having a media literacy course(s) at their institution (see Table 3). However, the vast differences in the course-titles alone signifies the vague boundaries for what constitutes a course in "media literacy." What the participants reported as media literacy is the most revealing evidence for the confusion of the media literacy term in higher education.

So-called media literacy courses were reported with titles such as educational technology, introduction to mass communication, mass media, television production, digital video,

basic filmmaking, mass communication theory and research, media and community, and so on.<sup>12</sup> All of the reported courses could be media literacy-oriented. However, based on the content and available syllabi, it is difficult to distinguish whether or not they are teaching the material to create media literacy learning experiences.<sup>13</sup>

More recently, courses have appeared that include the term “media literacy” in their titles (see Table 4). This does not necessarily mean that these courses are utilizing media literacy educational philosophies to teach, but that they are utilizing the term to implement new curricular approaches to media education. This also points to the general growth of post-secondary media literacy education. Table 4 is not inclusive of all new courses that include the term media literacy, but representative of some of the general new trends in course offerings.

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<sup>12</sup> For complete list of reported courses, see:  
[http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/survey/survey\\_Data-Totals.htm](http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/survey/survey_Data-Totals.htm)

<sup>13</sup> It is, however, positive to see a relatively large number of universities recognizing media literacy. Simply that the movement is on the radar of these schools is an important first step towards acknowledgement and integration.

**Table 3**

**Media Literacy Courses Offered in U.S. Higher Education: 2002**

Anderson University	San Francisco State University
Appalachian State University	Seattle Pacific University
Arizona State University	South Puget Sound Community College
Babson College	Southern Adventist University
Bay de Noc Community College	Southern Illinois University
Castleton State College	Southwest Missouri State University
Citrus College	St. Louis Community College
City College of San Francisco	SUNY-Stony Brook
College of Saint Rose	Texas Christian
College of St. Catherine	Trinity University
Dana College	Tyler Junior College
Drury University	University of Alabama
Endicott College	University of Alaska
Evergreen State College	University of Connecticut
George Mason University	University of Dayton
Gonzaga University	University of Hartford
Huntingdon College	University of Louisiana at Monroe
Lindenwood University	University of Massachusetts- Amherst
Lock Haven University	University of Massachusetts-Boston
Marquette University	University of Mississippi
McPherson College	University of Missouri-Kansas City
Minnesota State University	University of Nebraska at Omaha
Morehead State University	University of Oregon
Muskingum College	Wayne State University
New School	Webster University
New York University	Wesley College
Niagara University	West Virginia
Oakwood College	Wesleyan College
Pfeiffer University	Western Carolina University
Rutgers University	Western Washington University
Saint Michael's College	

Source: [http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/survey/survey\\_Data-Totals.htm](http://www.webster.edu/medialiteracy/survey/survey_Data-Totals.htm)

Looking specifically at the curricula of the media literacy courses located in 2006, their content is surprisingly similar to those reported in 2002. The courses at Portland State, Illinois, Maryland and Utah State all adhere to the foundations of media literacy in their

mission statements. Each course includes the general media literacy descriptors, including media evaluation, assessment, analysis, and production. Further, the courses specifically address different media and certain aspects of media analysis—race, gender, sex, violence, politics, and globalization. That these courses use “media literacy” in their titles further reinforces media literacy’s overall growth in popularity. This also, however, reinforces the notion that the field has not expanded in terms of frameworks, platforms, and general understanding of what media literacy is, but mainly in overall popularity.

**Table 4**

<b>Media Literacy Courses Offered in U.S. Higher Education – 2006 *</b>
Louisiana State University (ML Chair) Portland State University Temple University Tufts University (senior ML project) Utah State University University of Alaska, Fairbanks University of Illinois at Urbana University of Maryland University of San Francisco The University of Vermont
<small>*Institutions listed that offer courses with the words “media literacy” in their title.</small>

At Utah State and Maryland, the required course readings are available online and often deal with current media topics. At Illinois students not only produce media but are

required to use media logs to report on their exposure to media and advertising. The University of Alaska also offers a generalist course in media literacy, but on a distance.<sup>14</sup>

Generalist courses in media literacy are also available for upper-class students. The University of Maryland, Temple, and Portland State offer media literacy courses on the 300, 400, and 700 levels of education. The content of their courses is similar to the 100-level courses mentioned above, but it is assumed that their approaches to critical media analysis are tailored towards more advanced college students.

Still other recently born courses apply the term media literacy to specific topics. For example, the University of Vermont offers a course titled “Media Literacy and the Environment,” which explores “the fundamentals of media literacy as they relate to the environment and environmental issues, including advertising, public relations, consumerism, commercialism, media economics (ownership and control), media coverage of environmental and global issues, and media and environmental activism” (University of Vermont). The University of San Francisco uses the term digital media literacy to teach about educational technologies and digital media in the classroom. Thus, the term “media literacy” has been expanded and adapted to fit numerous disciplines and topics of study. This has occurred since the onset of media literacy in the United States.

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<sup>14</sup> Alaska’s weekly course agenda is similar to the other generalist courses, the only difference being that the students never meet face-to-face, instead participating and completing all assignments online.

### **Going Forward: Three Questions**

The analysis of programs and courses in post-secondary media literacy education reveals a term burdened by pedagogical and definitional complexities. What passes for a media literacy course? Where do media literacy courses belong? Should media literacy be integrated or offered as a stand alone subject? As each of these questions is addressed, it is important to contemplate the possible outcomes, both positive and negative, of setting parameters for media literacy's existence in the university, or if parameters are necessary at all.

#### ***What Passes for Media Literacy?***

Realistically and practically, no single answer exists for what constitutes a media literacy curriculum in higher education. From the vast differences noticed in the Silverblatt team's 2002 survey results, it is safe to assume that the definition of media literacy is, by its nature, subject to vast and varied interpretations. What is considered "media literacy" includes most elements that are generally incorporated into a media studies and/or mass communication track.

However, media literacy education distinguishes itself from general media studies/mass communication education in the sense that it is based *not on specific content*. *Rather a media literacy education experience should be the application of content to specific learning outcomes*. As detailed in Chapter 2, media literacy education has no prescribed content—or an infinite amount of content—to teach. Thus, media literacy includes all types of media studies. Where media literacy education becomes unique is in its approach

towards learning outcomes. By placing the student in the middle of the learning experience, media literacy education aims to teach students critical skills—comprehension, evaluation, analysis, production—of media messages across all media formats, in a way that enables the critical understanding and awareness of media’s responsibilities in democracy and roles in civil society. The *transfer* between skill attainment and critical reflection is the crux of media literacy.

If media literacy can be reconceived to focus on a shift from content to learning outcomes, frameworks and platforms can be built in ways that can enact effective and unified post-secondary media literacy education. Currently, disparate academic interpretations of media literacy have made it difficult to shift the conversation towards constructive learning outcomes and endeavors. Academics are trained to debate, discuss, define, and create terminology for new educational initiatives. It is no great surprise, then, that a term as loose as “media literacy” is subject to criticism and opposition. However, this does not mean the term is inadequate, but rather that its tangible and concrete existence for the university is still largely marginal. As a result, all the courses listed above pass for media education courses, but not all may pass for producing media literacy outcomes.

### ***Where does Media Literacy Belong?***

The most obvious location to date has been in schools of mass communication, journalism, media studies, and education. Media literacy courses also exist less frequently in English and American studies. Commonly, media literacy is either taught through a media lens or an education lens.

The media lens is concerned with critical media analysis. It specifically aims to teach the skills and dispositions to view media in informed, understanding, and knowledgeable ways. The education lens deals with preparing future teachers to integrate media into the classroom. This entails teaching K-12 students about media's social and individual influences. Both strands of media education are effective and can co-exist. This dissertation explores the critical media side of media literacy.

Ideally, a media literacy course should be offered as a core course to undergraduates across disciplines, just as general arts, sciences, and humanities are required for undergraduates to have a well-rounded education. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century media landscape, it is important for all university students to graduate with a basic understanding of the ways in which mediated information influences individuals, societies, and democracy. At the same time, media literacy should be offered at higher and more critical levels for students in both media and education programs. Future journalists need to know about the possible influences of their work, future teachers need to know how to effectively teach with and about media across all disciplines, and the future public should be aware of media's role in society. The university should see these courses as necessary prerequisites for their graduating student-bodies.

### ***Is the Integrated Approach Okay?***

Should media literacy be adopted as a separate course, or should it be spread across the curriculum of a department? The overwhelming evidence to date has been of the integrationist method. Relatively few departments offer courses solely dealing with

media literacy teaching and learning outcomes. In 2002, it was reported that discussions concerning media literacy, if taken place at all, were reserved for classes taught in the general education programs (Christ, 2004).

David Considine (2004), founder and director of Appalachian State's graduate program in media literacy, points out that on the primary and secondary school levels there "is some evidence of media literacy being offered as an elective or stand-alone subject...the dominant pattern has been one of integration rather than isolation" (p. 100). For K-12 education, it is perhaps logical to place media education in social studies programs. At the university level, in addition to practical skills-based courses, students currently enroll in courses examining ethics, the role of the journalist, mass communication and globalization, media and society, and so on. If the skills media literacy education purports to teach are acknowledged and taught by journalism, media, and mass communication faculty, then the integrationist model for media education can substantially benefit students. However, if media literacy's skills and learning outcomes are not recognized a stand-alone course available to a large pool of students and taught by a media educator who specializes in the foundations of media literacy education may be more effective.

### **Parameters for Post-Secondary Media Literacy Education**

Media literacy education can go beyond basic media and communication courses in that although it is grounded in inquiry-based pedagogy, it provides "a new way to teach and more importantly, *a new way to learn*" (Thoman & Jolls, 2004). However, as evidenced in this chapter, few concrete media literacy definitions or frameworks exist for

the university. This has hindered media literacy's effectiveness in higher education. For such teaching and learning experiences to occur, inclusive and accurate parameters for media literacy's existence in higher education must be drawn.

Some have argued that media literacy's loose terminology and wide applicability are positive consequences of a field meant to extend across all disciplines, especially in an information age. The overwhelming evidence from this chapter reflects the need for a more structured approach to media literacy in the university. Ideally, media literacy would exist as both a stand-alone course and as content integrated into courses dealing with mediated-information. This does not mean building one dominant narrative or rigid curriculum, but providing flexible frameworks within which media literacy can exist.

A recent ERIC database review of trends in journalism and mass communication education summarized three "enduring issues" in media education:

1. The need to focus on service to the public.
2. The need to address challenges posed by new economic, technological, and social realities.
3. The need to make journalism and mass communication education and practice diverse, inclusive, and global (Brynildssen, 2007).

Media literacy can be the educational entity that helps serve the public by teaching media for aware and informed citizenship. The promise of media literacy is to provide a democratic and critical approach to media that allows students the opportunity to become

active media users, participants in society, and informed citizens (Livingstone, 2004).

Only then will media literacy gain credibility as a teaching tool and educational discipline. Until its outcomes are made clear and its status in higher education is legitimated, media literacy will remain on the margins of higher education.

## CHAPTER 2

### FOUNDATIONS FOR POST-SECONDARY MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

As evidenced in Chapter 1, media literacy's figurative looseness has led to its marginal existence in the university. As a result, the media literacy field has struggled to solidify itself as a teaching tool for higher education. At the same time, however, media literacy has grown considerably over the last decade or so. Organizations devoted to the advancement of media literacy have grown since the 1990's<sup>15</sup>. Thus, despite some of the fundamental problems with media literacy discussed in Chapter One, media literacy's continued growth provides ample evidence that media literacy education should no longer be questioned as part of the higher education landscape. Rather, it is perhaps appropriate to ask: How should media literacy exist in the academy?

One outcome of increased media literacy initiatives in the university has been its overall growth in exposure and popularity. Scholars from numerous academic disciplines have, consequently, adopted the term to serve specific academic and scholarly needs. New media literacy initiatives are now born across university departments. Additionally, funding organizations are contributing large sums of money to new media literacy initiatives with each passing year. It is no surprise, therefore, that academics have been increasingly attracted to the term over the last decade.

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<sup>15</sup> Two prominent national organizations for media education exist in the United States: the Alliance for a Media Literate America (AMLA, <http://www.amlainfo.org>), and the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME, <http://www.acmecoalition.org>).

However, because it has struggled to build and maintain consistent parameters for its existence in higher education, new approaches to media literacy education are often different from its core teaching and learning outcomes. Media literacy is often personalized by scholars in light of what they see as the ideal outcomes of the field. Such use of the term has both positive and negative implications for media literacy's existence in the university.

Positively, media literacy continues to grow. New initiatives have increased the breadth of academic scholarship devoted to the field. Heightened exposure has allowed media literacy to gain considerable recognition in mass communication, journalism, and media fields. New approaches to media literacy have allowed for its theoretical foundations to be challenged and rethought—something long overdue in U.S. media literacy.

The International Center for Media and the Public Agenda (ICMPA), housed in the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism, along with the Salzburg Global Seminar, in 2006 launched the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change. This program utilizes the tenets of media literacy with a global contingent of students to create a "global media literacy" curriculum for enhanced awareness and understanding of media's role in global citizenship and global responsibility. Henry Jenkins, Professor of Literature and Director of the Comparative Media Studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), has launched the New Media Literacies project, a multi-year effort "working to integrate new media materials into compelling activities for K-12 students for use in or out of school" (New Media Literacies). At Temple University,

media literacy scholar Renee Hobbs runs the Media Education Lab, which works to improve “media literacy education through scholarship and community service” (Media Education Lab). Perhaps the most successful initiative to come out of the Media Education Lab is *My Pop Studio*<sup>16</sup>, an interactive, web-based media literacy tool for girls. These initiatives, among a host of others, are increasing the purview of media literacy throughout the United States and worldwide.

Negatively, media literacy continues to grow with little direction or cohesion. New media education advancements have stretched the boundaries of media literacy to include teaching and learning techniques foreign to the media literacy field.

At a base level, media literacy must continue to grow, but within a set of flexible educational frameworks that ensure its skills and dispositions are met. Media literacy’s integration, on the higher education level, should be focused on ensuring that its learning “outcomes” are taught to in the classroom. Failing to do so will both compromise media literacy’s unique qualities, and inhibit its overall effectiveness in higher education.

Part Three of this dissertation offers a framework for post-secondary media literacy education. This framework is tailored specifically towards building a comprehensive but flexible platform for media literacy in the academy. Before such a framework can be effectively realized, deconstructing and reviewing media literacy philosophies in light of their specific applicability to higher education should help ground the discussion. What should media literacy look like in the university? How should media literacy be

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<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.mypopstudio.com/>

approached by post-secondary teachers? What differentiates media literacy from general media studies? These questions must be addressed before any successful post-secondary media literacy reforms can occur.

### **Separating Media Literacy from Media Studies**

One way to approach a unique idea of media literacy in higher education is to pinpoint what makes media literacy distinct from general media studies. Chapter 1 revealed that post-secondary media literacy education struggled from definitional and curricular inconsistencies that hindered more than facilitated its effectiveness in the university. The resulting premise was that, in the university *everyone who teaches media teaches media literacy*.

### ***Why Everyone Doesn't Teach Media Literacy***

The founding definition for media literacy in the United States—the ability to “access, analyze, evaluate and produce both print and electronic media” (Aufderheide, 1993)—was developed by leading media literacy scholars at a 1993 leadership conference convened by the Aspen Institute. This marked the first official gathering devoted to media literacy in the United States. Thirty leading media educators and scholars from around the United States gathered to discuss the current and future of U.S. media literacy education. Out of this conference materialized a report, titled: “The Aspen Institute Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy.” This report proved to be the “birth-certificate” (Center for Media Literacy) of the U.S. media literacy movement. The Center for Media Literacy described the outcomes of the Aspen Institute Report and their influence on the media literacy movement in the United States:

Consisting of three interrelated documents, including an extensive background paper sketching important developments and contributions in the early years of the movement, the report was distributed widely to the worlds of education, media and philanthropy. With the highly respected Aspen Institute name attached, doors opened, calls were returned and funding proposals began to be approved. Many will attest that although media literacy was actually born in the U.S. years before, it was this report that served as the official birth certificate (Center for Media Literacy).

In addition to authoring the definition for U.S. media literacy, Patricia Aufderheide, Professor of Communication at American University and Rapporteur at the 1993 conference, identified five general concepts that should be recognized by a media literate individual and inclusive in any media literacy educational experience. Wrote Aufderheide (1993):

- media are constructed, and construct reality
- media have commercial implications
- media have ideological and political implications
- form and content are related in each medium, each of which has a unique aesthetic, codes and conventions
- receivers negotiate meaning in media

These concepts are broad and encompassing. They signify a strong theoretical foundation for media literacy in general, absent of attention to any specific education level, teaching technique, or learning outcome. Aufderheide's definition and concepts together form a strong foundation for media literacy that remains the backbone of the U.S. media literacy movement in the present day.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In 1995, the *National Telemedia Council* published its definition of media literacy. The council is a professional organization based in Madison, WI, that deals with the promotion of media literacy initiatives, and also publishes *Telemidium*, the only journal dedicated solely to the pursuit of media literacy. Their definition is a reflection of the vagaries that reflected the movement in the 1990s and continues to do so in the present.

[Media literacy is] the ability to choose, to understand—within the context of content, form/style, impact, industry and production—to question, to evaluate, to create and/or produce and to respond thoughtfully to the media we consume (National Telemedium Council, 1995).

How do Aufderheide's terms and concepts for media literacy apply to higher education?

The base foundations of U.S. media literacy are broad to the point that successful adoption of such terms and concepts should not, in theory, be problematic for the university. However, the theoretical weight of these concepts has led to disparate uses of the term media literacy. These uses have both led to general academic ambiguity towards the term media literacy, and to some key limitations for media literacy education's effectiveness in the academy. Two fundamental issues expose these limitations.

First, as previously expressed, definitions mean little with regard to how they are taught in the classroom and measured as learning outcomes. The core attributes of media literacy are enabled in the classroom through curricular initiatives and teacher training. As stated earlier, curricular initiatives pertain almost exclusively to K-12 education. In higher education, curricula cannot be developed and delivered to academics. Nor are university-level educators required to have completed any teacher training for their teaching posts. As a result, the definition and concepts born in 1992 have made little progress in higher education. Accordingly, most new media literacy initiatives are in the form of teacher training guides and curricular products.<sup>18</sup> This does not mean that the Aspen Institute's "birth certificate" is irrelevant to post-secondary media literacy education. Rather, for post-secondary media literacy, achieving such outcomes cannot be premised predominantly on curricular products.

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<sup>18</sup> The focus on curricular products could also allude to why very little assessment and evaluation of media literacy's effectiveness on all levels of education has occurred to date. Successful curricula are rather lucrative, and having little assessment of their quality means there is little pre-existing evidence for a standard of quality that media literacy curricula builders must achieve.

Second, the terminology that defines media literacy allows all university-level education about media to become media literacy education. As a result, educators using media may report their course to be a media literacy course with little understanding of what a media literacy classroom looks like. Educators can be media literacy educators if they teach students to decode, analyze, evaluate, and produce, for example, fine art, journalism, pornography, architecture, or a short story. This is not a problem per se, but rather it allows media literacy's educational foundations to be claimed by many academic disciplines, many of which have little formal knowledge of media literacy education.

Using media messages to teach in the classroom does not automatically mean media literacy teaching and learning experiences are occurring. The media literacy field often makes use of its educational goals by developing curricula and teaching techniques that will help make students media literate. This entails ensuring that students are taught the skills to effectively decode, analyze, evaluate, and produce media. At the same time students are expected to become cognizant of Aufderheide's five basic concepts a media literate individual should understand. University teachers claiming to teach media literacy should have a basic framework from which they can use *their own* curricula to enable media literacy learning experiences. Whether this occurs through a series of questions, examples, or lecture slides is secondary to the teacher effectively teaching about the social, civic, and democratic implications of media, in addition to critical media analysis. The results of this study will show the consequences of such media literacy outcomes not being achieved in one university-level course.

The concepts born at the 1992 Aspen Institute Media Literacy Conference were a watershed moment for media literacy. The conference initiated the strides the media literacy field has made over the last 15 years, and the current exposure it enjoys today. However, for the university, media literacy has yet to take the next step in its existence: offering ways to approach the foundational definitions and concepts in terms of learning outcomes. In higher education, media literacy requires a curricular overhaul—not in the form of new weekly curriculum plans but through the means of making media educators aware of the ways in which they can use their curricula to teach the skills and dispositions that post-secondary media literacy advocates. Currently, few concrete media literacy methodologies exist that address how to effectively teach the attributes of media literacy in the university.

### **Foundations for Post-Secondary Media Literacy Education**

That media literacy has been suffocated by wide application and figurative looseness is not new (Jhally & Lewis, 1998). As expressed above, offering frameworks and platforms for post-secondary media literacy can help solidify its existence in the university. Specific frameworks for the classroom, however, will be ineffective if they are not taught within a larger theoretical platform. Students simply made aware of certain media practices without seeing their larger implications run the risk of not fully realizing media's vital necessity to 21<sup>st</sup> century civic democracy.

Under which theoretical umbrella should media literacy exist? What specific foundations can enable successful post-secondary media literacy education? This dissertation advances *engaged citizenship* as the foundation through which post-secondary media literacy should be taught.

### *Citizenship in a Media Age*

In 1985, British media scholar Len Masterman wrote about the possible influences of media education on citizenship. Masterman underscored the role media education can play in democratic institutions. Wrote Masterman (1985):

Media education is an essential step in the long march towards a truly participatory democracy, and the democratization of our institutions. Widespread media literacy is essential if all citizens are to wield power, make rational decisions, become effective change-agents, and have an effective involvement with the media. It is in this much wider sense of “education for democracy” that media education can play the most significant role of all (p. 13).<sup>19</sup>

Masterman posited that students, if educated about media, would not only increase their ability to intelligently use media for personal gains, but further strengthen their values and beliefs about democracy. In this way, the necessary conversations and discussions about political, social, economic, and cultural issues would be knowledgeable, diverse, and progressive. Masterman (1998) wrote, over a decade later: “It is our crucial role as media teachers to ensure the continued evolution of that critical public” (p. xi).

What does Masterman’s critical public look like? Is it a public who cedes to the government? Who critically views the rest of the world? Or is it a public critical towards its own social establishments? Media literacy education, as Masterman conceived it, must

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<sup>19</sup> Taken from the 2006 publication, *Global Trends in Media Education*, by Tony Lavendar, Birgitte Tufte, and Dafna Lemish, (Eds). See references for full citation.

teach media in a way that forces students to be the critical public. It must be both engaging and skeptical. It must show both the positive and negative functions of the mass media. It must teach skills but also the larger ideological and cultural connections between media and society. If not, the relevance of being critically engaged with media will be compromised.

Masterman's ideas also reaffirm the co-dependency between media and citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This co-dependency is essential for the existence of democracy. Citizens need diverse, credible and full information to make decisions that ensure their continued social well-being, freedoms, and protections. Understanding media's democratic roles and responsibilities is now a prerequisite for aware citizenship.

In the present day, it is safe to assume that the mass media have adopted the role of a social institution. Media increasingly provide people membership in groups (programs, chat rooms, products), stabilize daily life (newspaper, TV daily programs, email), and function as a large educational tool (TV, Internet, entertainment) (Silverblatt, 2004). Further, in the United States the average young adult (18-30) spends 6.5 hours per day outside of the classroom engaged with media (Kaiser, 2005). David Buckingham (2003), Professor of Education and Director of the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media, Institute of Education, University of London, wrote:

The media are undoubtedly the major contemporary means of cultural expression and communication: to become an active participant in public life necessarily involves making use of the modern media. The media, it is often argued, have now taken the place of the family, the church and the school as the major socializing influence in contemporary society (p. 5).

It is now difficult to discredit the media as the main conduit through which necessary means of information are transmitted. Parallel to its socializing functions, media has unavoidably adopted a civic role: that of preserving and maintaining an informed public. To be active civic participants, individuals must have access to the information that explains why certain civic decisions are made and to what effect. They need to see justifications, details, viewpoints, arguments, opinions, and facts. Without access to such information, people are effectively denied their right to make the informed decisions they believe will better themselves, their community, and their country.

Henry Jenkins builds on Michael Schudson's concept of the "monoterial citizen"—a surveyor of news rather than a gatherer; one watchful of the bits of information constantly presenting themselves—to discuss the relationship between media in a digital age and citizenship. Jenkins explores this relationship by focusing on the ways in which digital media and the Internet have shifted what it means to be an "informed" citizen. In Jenkins's 2006 text *Convergence Culture*, he combines Schudson's new idea of citizenship with Pierre Levy's form of knowledge culture<sup>20</sup>—"knowledgeable in some areas, somewhat aware in others, operating in a context of mutual trust and shared resources" (p. 226)—to promote a scenario in which:

The monitoring citizen needs to develop new critical skills in assessing information—a process that occurs both on an individual level within the home or the workplace, and on a more collaborative level through the work of various knowledge communities. (p. 227).

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<sup>20</sup> For more information on knowledge cultures, see: Pierre Levy (1997), *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*. Perseus Books: Cambridge, MA.

Jenkins's work highlights the need for a citizenry educated about the role of media and information in democracy. The growing presence of media in individuals' daily lives has led to a shift in how people attain information and build personal views on civic and political issues. These shifts in information attainment and processing have at their core the relationship between media, citizenship, and democracy. Different forms of civic discourse are predicated on the idea that citizens need to be informed to be contributors to their democracy. Media's increasingly central role in this process has, in addition to calling for a new way to think about informed citizenship, led to an increased need for education about media and its civic functions.

How does media literacy approach citizenship? One of the main aims of media literacy education is to provide not only media analysis skills, but also the ability to effectively use media to exercise democratic rights (Brownell & Brownell, 2003). UCLA's Rozana Carducci and Robert Rhoads (2005) call on media literacy education to develop responses to media's socializing tendencies:

Today's students are largely socialized through the media, a reality that calls for the implementation of curricular and cocurricular pedagogical practices that develop *media literacy*—the ability to critically analyze and decode messages embedded in various media productions (p. 3).

Carducci and Rhoads offer no frameworks, platforms, or outcome-based approaches to “developing media literacy.” Nevertheless, their point is relevant. The theoretical starting place for post-secondary media literacy should be the aware citizen. Teaching critical skills is inadequate without teaching how these skills can lead to an enhanced understanding of the civic role(s) of media. Media literacy can make aware the media's

social influences on democratic and national ideologies. If successful, media literacy can be the educational tool that enables healthy relationships between individuals and the media.

Art Silverblatt (2004) wrote of the need for media literacy to counteract the public's increasing reliance on media:

...audiences have come to expect the media to serve the functions of traditional social institutions—functions that they were never designed to fulfill, looking for answers when the media presentation is simply focused on attracting a large audience by any means possible. The public's reliance on Western media for guidance and support can therefore be problematic unless media messages are examined critically and put into meaningful perspectives (p. 38).

Silverblatt accurately reflects the current role of media in society, and the increasing importance of educational parameters that address this current state. What do Silverblatt's "meaningful perspectives" look like? And where do they come from? In light of Silverblatt's argument, meaningful perspectives are perspectives on citizenship. If indeed an unhealthy reliance on media has evolved in Western societies, post-secondary media literacy education can address this unhealthy reliance by teaching about media's civic, social, and democratic roles and responsibilities.

Teaching media through a civic lens does not only include "news" media, or "hard" news program. In addition, media literacy must teach the role of pop culture, entertainment, game-playing, and blogging in the political process. In this way, media literacy education can use the ideas of citizenship put forth by Jenkins, Schudson, Mastermann, and others

(see Barber, 2007; Jerit et al., 2007; Dahlgren, 2006; Lewis, 2006) to elicit learning experiences that highlight this complex relationship.

Higher education is also the last formal education level in which students are prepared to become independent and active participants in civil society. Wrote the authors' of the Carnegie Foundation for Advancement in Teaching's *Educating Citizens*:

College is the last stage of formal education for most Americans and the last formal education outside of their field of specialization for those who pursue further study. Although informal education can continue throughout life—at work and through engagement with the media, the arts, and books—to a great extent experiences in college determine how inclined individuals will be to pursue this kind of ongoing learning and what intellectual and personal capacities they will bring to those engagements (Colby et al., 2003, p. 6).

The continued pursuit of knowledge is central to the advancement of media literacy in higher education. Individuals need to actively seek information to stay current with local and national affairs. Media literacy can help individuals find to access the relevant information to pursue “ongoing learning” in a knowledgeable way. Post-secondary media literacy education must be held accountable for highlighting engaged citizenship as part of its agenda. Otherwise, the field will fail in preparing an informed and active citizenry.

### ***Beyond Inoculation, Towards Empowerment***

In the United States, the media literacy movement has commonly been seen as protectionist: sensitizing students to the negative effects of the media (Buckingham, 2005). The protectionist approach to media education posits that if students are sensitized to the ways in which media “effects” societies and individuals, they will be better equipped to respond to the influence of media practices. As evidenced in the results of

this dissertation, taking a protectionist approach to media literacy can be potentially harmful to students.

If students are taught to defend or protect themselves from media, they are, in a way, being taught to shelter themselves from something negative. Teaching media in this light lends itself to negative learning outcomes as much as it does to empowerment and awareness of media. Students exposed predominately to what media don't do, shouldn't do, or do wrong, may lead them to believe they are learning the skills necessary to "defend" themselves from media's sinister behaviors. Such sensitization to media will do little to facilitate a critical awareness of the complex but necessary existence of media.

In the same way that media literacy should approach post-secondary education by using a civic platform, it should advocate teaching students to become aware of the diverse and complex ways media influences society and democracy.

### ***Buckingham and the Effects Debate***

David Buckingham delivered a keynote speech at the 2005 National Media Education Conference in San Francisco, titled: "Will Media Education Ever Escape the Effects Debate"? Buckingham's speech addressed a key dispute in media literacy education. Teaching about the effects of media is an important aspect of media literacy on all levels of education. However, teaching effects to "protect" students is significantly different from teaching about media effects to make students "aware."

In the present day, protecting students against the effects of media is akin to protecting a child from the sun. While it is smart to educate about the potential harms of the sun to the body and skin, the child must also be taught about the sun's absolute necessity for the existence of the Earth as we know it. In the same way, media are essential for democratic society as we know it. Students should be taught not only to protect themselves from media, but also to understand the complex, often dynamic, and necessary existence of media.

Buckingham's speech attempted to show that media education, on all levels of schooling, should ultimately not be about protecting youth *from* media effects, but about engaging students *with* media. Wrote Buckingham (2005):

Ultimately, I think the effects debate puts us all in a false position. It puts kids in a false position, because it presumes that they are incompetent – that they are somehow passive dupes or victims of the media. And then it marks out a place for teachers as their saviors, as the people who will rescue them from media influence and show them the error of their ways. I think this mistakes what kids already know about media; and it oversimplifies how they learn (p. 20).

Placing media education within the effects debate assumes, as Buckingham mentions, that the audience is powerless and that the media are all-powerful. Buckingham premises the above statement with an example of violence portrayed in American media. He asks if the media are the root of violence and aggression in society, or rather a microcosm of cultural, ethnic, class, religious and societal ideologies and dispositions.

Teaching about media effects is central to media literacy education.<sup>21</sup> However, media educators who use effects theories to expose predominantly negative and critical media practices often overlook two key points. First, highlighting negative media practices excludes the diverse, alternative, positive, and necessary existences of the media. If media education does not account for the numerous ways in which media work to keep societies informed, especially in a global age, they will be excluding important media functions from the conversation. Media literacy can breed aware and informed citizens through showing media's positive and negative roles and responsibilities throughout societies around the world.

Second, couching media literacy in *cause and effect* frameworks avoids the key complexities involved in the civic roles of media. Buckingham (2005) elaborated on this idea:

...we can only understand the role of the media in the context of other social, historical and cultural forces, and that seeing this in terms of simple notions of 'cause and effect' often leads us to ignore the complexity of what we are concerned about (p. 19).

The purview of media literacy is to embrace the effects debate and utilize its theories to teach about media's relationship to society, democracy, and culture. Media literacy should not teach media effects with the aim to provide students the means to protect themselves from the influences of media. If media literacy fails to show the larger implications and complexities involved in the effects of media, it runs the risk of breeding cynicism instead of understanding and engagement.

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<sup>21</sup> See Appendix B for an overview of the effects tradition and its relevance to media literacy.

Media, as Buckingham (2005) notes, is “now ubiquitous and unavoidable” (p. 20).

Buckingham’s main work is with primary and secondary education levels, akin to most of media literacy scholarship. However, his ideas are highly applicable to higher education. For media literacy to have a positive influence on university-level students, it must go beyond sensitizing them to the negative functions of the media. It must make students aware of the complex and robust existence of a necessary component to democratic society.

The theoretical foundations for media literacy—specifically engaged citizenship—should be seen as channels through which media literacy initiatives and frameworks can be structured for the university. Citizenship and awareness can serve as the foundations on which flexible platforms can be built to effectively implement media literacy in a classroom, department, or university.

### **Towards a Post-Secondary Media Literacy Framework**

As *Beyond Cynicism* moves towards exploring an undergraduate course in media literacy, it is important to remember the central themes of this study, highlighted in Part One:

- Few university-level programs and/or courses are devoted exclusively to media literacy. Many college-level educators report teaching media literacy, but less frequently teach towards the learning outcomes stressed by media literacy education.

- On the university level, media literacy has been compromised by wide and loose interpretation. This has suffocated both the term itself and the educational goals of the field. A lack of foundational structure has produced a muddled conception not only of what media literacy is but how it functions as a teaching tool and curricular initiative.
- Media literacy's growing popularity has caused its root educational foundations to be adapted for vastly differing personal pursuits. This is a predictable but problematic outcome.
- Media literacy has been somewhat ignored in terms of the evaluation and assessment of its overall quality and effectiveness. Media literacy educators and scholars all write extensively of the benefits of media literacy for democracy, society, and individuals, but rarely discuss how these benefits tangibly occur in the classroom. This has resulted in little physical evidence as to students learning about media's social and democratic roles.
- The focus of media literacy in higher education should be on learning outcomes. This is evidenced by the idea that media literacy is based *not on specific content*. *Rather a media literacy education experience should be the application of content to specific learning outcomes* This entails that media literacy not stop at teaching critical skills but teach skill attainment with critical understanding of media's social functions, regardless of what specific content is utilized.
- For media literacy to approach a framework for higher education, it must be premised on certain foundational and theoretical entry points. This dissertation advances *engaged citizenship* as media literacy's entryway for higher education.

Teaching media with these larger issues in mind can help build a more concrete platform for flexible but unified platforms of post-secondary media literacy education.

In light of the shortcomings present in post-secondary media literacy education, this dissertation explored an undergraduate course in media literacy at the University of Maryland. This exploration attempted to assess what students were learning in a media literacy class, and how their newfound knowledge transferred into an understanding of media's role in the United States' democratic society. This was the largest study ever of media literacy education on the post-secondary level. The results will show that media literacy, while effectively teaching critical skills, was not effectively connecting newfound skills to civic awareness of media's role in civil society and democracy.

## CHAPTER 3

### EXPLORING MEDIA LITERACY OUTCOMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This dissertation employed two research methods—a quasi-experiment and focus groups—to address the following research questions:

Q1. How does media literacy education affect undergraduate university students' media comprehension, evaluation, and analysis skills?

Q2. How does media literacy education influence university students' understanding of media's roles and responsibilities in a democratic society?

To explore these questions, this study utilized 239 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Maryland. The entire sample participated in a series of experimental measures that took the form of a pre-post/post-only quasi-experiment design, with a post-only control group. The experiment measured media literacy skill attainment—comprehension, evaluation, analysis—across TV, print, and radio formats. Additionally, a portion (n=27) of the sample participated in three focus group discussions, which explored student views on media's role in society and democracy, and the possible influences of education about media.

In this study statistics alone did not provide a complete picture about what students learned in the J175: Media Literacy course. While the experiment did reveal significant effects of the curriculum on students' critical media analysis skill levels, it did not

address individuals' views on media. Focus groups were added to provide such experiential reflection. Employing mixed methodologies allowed for both inductive and deductive reasoning and assertions to be made, with greater quality and scope (Sydenstricker-Neto, 2007; Creswell, 2002).

While the results of this study cannot speak for media literacy across all higher education disciplines, and cannot offer more than one framework based on the specific outcomes discussed herein, they should and can advance theories on media literacy education in the university. This study can further offer frameworks for implementing media literacy in university departments, and for conducting more stringent research on post-secondary media literacy education. As the results will reflect, such research should be highly valuable to the future quality of post-secondary media literacy.

### *Specifics of the Study*

#### *Site Selection*

All data collection took place at the University of Maryland, College Park. The research explores the *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* (J175) course offered by Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism. The researcher had no active role in the J175 course during the academic year of data gathering and analysis, to ensure that no external influence or biases affected the study.<sup>22</sup> The researcher also had limited input into the curricular makeup of the course, but strongly believed that the course involved content and scope representative of media literacy education.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The researcher was a teaching assistant in the course during the 2005/2006 academic year.

<sup>23</sup> As explained in detail in Chapters 1 and 2, discerning what is from what is not media literacy is difficult, as judging by content alone is problematic. *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* covers the numerous elements

Beyond the convenience of its location, the University of Maryland's size and diversity make it an ideal institution for this study. Home to over 35,000 undergraduate and graduate students, Maryland is the flagship university in the state and a nationally recognized institute of higher education. In 2007, the *U.S. News and World Report* ranked Maryland 54<sup>th</sup> in national university rankings (U.S. News & World Report, 2007). Further, *Kiplinger's Personal Finance Magazine*, in the same year, ranked Maryland 15<sup>th</sup> in value for public education across the United States (Kiplinger's, 2007). Maryland's campus is also known for its diverse population: approximately one-third of its total enrollment comprises minority and foreign students. Maryland also boasts a broad and reputable faculty.

Maryland's diverse profile helped lessen any externalities that may have possibly weakened the validity of the data, including the argument that students, similar in ethnicity, race, gender, social status, and so on, may further limit the exploration to a smaller subset of the general population. Its characteristics allowed for a diverse pool of students to participate in this study.

### ***Participant Selection***

Of the 239 total participants, 170 were enrolled in the *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* (J175) course. These students formed the experimental group. The course was first offered in the fall of 2004, and soon became one of the more over-enrolled courses offered at the University of Maryland. J175 is a *CORE Interdisciplinary & Emerging*

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involved with decoding, analyzing, evaluating, and producing media messages. For this reason, and based on the results of Chapter 1, it was deemed representative of a post-secondary media literacy curriculum.

*Issues Course/CORE Diversity Course*, meaning that the course satisfies a core general undergraduate degree requirement. The course overview states that J175 provides:

An analysis of the information, values and underlying messages conveyed via television, newspapers, the Internet, magazines, radio and film. [*J175: Media Literacy*] examines the accuracy of those messages and explores how media shape views of politics, culture and society (Philip Merrill College of Journalism).<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Susan Moeller, Associate Professor at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism and the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland, is the lead professor of the J175 course. Professor Moeller has taught J175 since its inception in 2004. Additionally three-to-five teaching assistants each teach multiple discussion sections once a week.<sup>25</sup> Professor Moeller and the teaching assistants were all versed in the research being conducted, and very helpful in assisting the researcher with all data collection activities.

All the students enrolled in J175 participated in the study.<sup>26</sup> Those who were under 18 years of age participated but their data was not included in the results. Additionally, some students dropped the course mid-way through the semester, were unable to attend class during a certain data collection session, or did not properly fill out the data collection forms. These students' data were not included in the study. There was a total mortality rate of 17 students.

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<sup>24</sup> The J175 course syllabus can be found at: <http://www.jclass.umd.edu/j175> User Name: j175, Password: Moeller

<sup>25</sup> This number has fluctuated based on class enrollment and available assistantships. During the data collection for this dissertation, there were four teaching assistants assigned to the J175 course.

<sup>26</sup> The student participants were all offered the opportunity to decline participation at any point during the study. However, all eligible students chose to participate.

In addition to the J175 participants, 69 undergraduates from the University of Maryland's College of Education participated in the form of a control group.<sup>27</sup> These students were divided into two courses in two different strands of the College of Education. Thirty-three of the participants were enrolled in the Educational Human Development course, *EDHD230: Human Development and Societal Institutions*. The remaining 36 control group participants were enrolled in two sections of the Education Policy and Leadership course, *EDPL301: Foundations of Education*.

The control group courses were selected based on the researcher's prior work with the College of Education. The education faculty were generous in donating one class session each to conduct this research. In return, the researcher provided a lecture on media education for each course after the data collection occurred. As the experiment tested the effects of a media literacy curriculum with students enrolled in the course, the aim of the control group was to offer a comparable base of students who had no prior formal exposure to a media literacy curriculum or anything overtly similar. To be rendered effective, the control group participants needed to reflect the J175 participants in diversity, class standing, and general demographics. Fortunately, as will be elaborated on in Chapter 4, the control group demographics were highly similar to the experimental group.

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<sup>27</sup> Thirty additional students were scheduled to participate in the control group portion of the study. However, on Wednesday, November 22<sup>nd</sup>, a power outage occurred on the University of Maryland campus during the data collection. The data collection could not be completed, and due to restrictions in class availability no makeup date could be secured.

## ***Permissions***

Institutional Review Board (IRB) human subject consent forms were administered during all data collection sessions. The participants were provided with an overview of the research and given the option to decline participation. Signed consent forms were collected and have been kept by the researcher until the data analysis is complete and one year has passed thereafter.<sup>28</sup> Full confidentiality has been promised to all participants. No specific names or other attributes will be used in the reporting of results.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

As previously mentioned, this dissertation employed a mixed methods approach for collecting data. Mixed methodology can elicit research that is both inductive in its use to locate emerging patterns and theories, and deductive in existing theory verification (Creswell, 2002). In this specific case, a quasi-experiment with nonequivalent groups, and focus groups, were chosen to explore the effects of media literacy on student learning in higher education.

### ***The Media Literacy Skills Assessment Test***<sup>29</sup>

Quantitative studies are bound by a basic assumption of a causal relationship. Theories are verified, reinforced, or disputed through rigorous testing of hypotheses. The deductive model assumes that if “some specific action is taken, it would logically follow that some other specific action would occur” (Weaver, 2003, p. 147). A quasi-experiment with non-equivalent groups was employed in this study to measure the effects of a media literacy curriculum on student media comprehension, analysis, and evaluation skills. The

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<sup>28</sup> See Appendix H for sample consent forms.

<sup>29</sup> See Appendix C for sample test questions.

experiment was administered pre-post/post-only to the experiment group and post-only to the control group during the fall semester 2006. The tests were conducted in controlled classroom environments.

Because the students were not randomly selected but part of a course, it was necessary to use nonequivalent group design to attain quantitative measurements. While such designs can be problematic, they are common in educational research and effective in assessing the impact of a curriculum treatment over a period of time (Hobbs & Frost, 2003). Non-equivalent research designs are a powerful and effective method for understanding how useful interventions can be in instructional settings (Hobbs & Frost, 2003).

Media literacy education skill attainment has been assessed on four past occasions.<sup>30</sup> No further instances could be found after extensive searching in the spring and fall of 2006. Of the four past uses, three tested secondary-level students, and one tested post-secondary students. The one test on the post-secondary level, however, utilized 34 students in a one-off experimental design. Further, the students were enrolled in the course the researcher taught. Thus, while the experiment signifies an attempt to quantifiably measure media literacy in higher education, it lacks experimental rigor. A variation of these past test iterations was used for this study.

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<sup>30</sup> See Appendix D for descriptions of three past experiments that measured the effectiveness of a media literacy curriculum. One of the four past uses could not be located, and thus is not included in the appendix descriptions.

### *The Test Instruments*<sup>31</sup>

The media literacy skills assessment test employed for this dissertation consisted of a television measure, a radio measure, and a print measure. Each measure was accompanied by a two-part survey questionnaire that was completed by the subjects after exposure to a specific measure.

The first part of each questionnaire consisted of five multiple choice recall questions, specific to the content of each message. These questions were included not to judge recall specifically, but to sensitize the subjects to the content of the messages before they completed the second section. These questions were not part of the data analysis for this dissertation.

The second section of the survey consisted of seven open-ended questions. All seven questions were the same for each measure (TV, radio, print).<sup>32</sup> The open-ended questions were developed to measure comprehension, analysis, and evaluation. In brief, each media literacy skill was evaluated by attaining the following information:

*Comprehension:* Summarize the message in the “who, what, when, where, why, how” format. What is the purpose of the message?

*Analysis:* Identify the sender of the message and its origins? What is omitted from the message? How did the message hold attention? What does this message say about the issue?

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<sup>31</sup> All instrument surveys are included in Appendix C.

<sup>32</sup> The terminology of questions six and seven slightly altered based on the different content of the TV, radio, and print messages.

*Evaluation:* What does this information suggest about the issue? How has this information changed what you believe about the issue?

The TV, radio, and print messages used for this dissertation were randomly chosen by the researcher. As previously stated, media literacy is not content specific but skill and learning outcome specific. As the aim of this experiment is to measure the effectiveness of a media literacy curriculum, the messages were not used to judge content but rather to test if university students increased comprehension, evaluation and analysis skills across media formats. The following three instruments were also chosen because they explored varying issues of national and global prominence: terrorism, climate change, and sexual behavior. All three instruments were also taken from predominant national media outlets, thus solidifying their credibility. Specifically, the instruments employed for the experiment were:

- *Television measure, 6 October 2004, CBS Nightly News with Bob Schaeffer:* This five minute news clip covered the New York City subway bomb threat that occurred on 5 October 2004, causing the evacuation and lockdown of the entire NYC subway system. The coverage seemed bland, focusing on scare tactics and flash images to grasp attention.
- *Radio measure, 16 August 2006, National Public Radio (NPR):* This five-minute clip of the “Pop Culture” portion of NPR’s *News and Notes* program discussed a recent Rand Foundation study concerning sexual lyrics in teen music and sexual behavior in teens in general. The broadcast featured a moderator, a representative from the Rand Foundation, and an editor of Vibe Magazine. The style was that of

debate and opinion concerning various styles of music, sexuality and race. The coverage was deep, and the questions asked were generally neutral.

- *Print measure, 9 August 2006, Time Magazine:* This one-page article titled, “Vail’s Wind Ambition,” by Clayton Neuman, covered the Vail Company’s new initiative to solely operate their businesses on wind power credits. The reporting was somewhat terse and clearly in favor of alternative energy initiatives.

### ***Procedures***

At the beginning of each experimental infusion, all student participants were provided a consent form, and a pre-test survey.<sup>33</sup> The pre-test survey asked for background information that includes students’ gender, sex, ethnicity, level of education, past formal media education, class standing, university major, parents’ education levels, exposure to media, and sources for gathering information, amongst other categories. Not all of this information was used in the resulting data analysis, but most of the variables were important for reaffirming the experimental results.

The researcher first described the test to the students, and offered students the opportunity to decline participation in the experiment by not signing the consent form. As the skills test was counted as class work for the courses involved, the students were required to complete the test, whether or not they chose to sign the consent form. Students were also asked at this time if they had any questions. After approximately ten minutes, the pre-test surveys and consent forms were collected, and the experiment began.

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<sup>33</sup> See Appendix E for full pre-test survey.

Students were exposed to one message (Radio, TV, Print) at a time, and after it was played, handed a questionnaire to complete. Students were given approximately ten minutes to complete each questionnaire. This occurred for all three instruments. Each media message was approximately five minutes in duration.<sup>34</sup> The entire session lasted approximately one hour.

The media messages were shown in random order for each experiment session. In one session, the participants may have taken each survey in the order *radio, print, television*. While in another session the order went *print, radio, television*, and so on. Randomizing the order of message exposure ensured that the continued placement of a certain message or medium did not interfere with the results of the study.

J175 is split into eight discussion sections.<sup>35</sup> On September 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>, the media literacy skills assessment test was randomly administered to four of the eight discussion group sections. During the fall 2006 semester, four teaching assistants taught two discussion sections each. Accordingly, the test was administered in one section of each teaching assistant. The total number of pre-test experimental subjects was 62. The sections that did not take the test were given a similar curriculum for the day. The students were told the test would not be graded but reviewed in order to gain a clear picture of media engagement levels at the onset of the course. The teaching assistants

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<sup>34</sup> The print measure was handed out to students to read. They were given five minutes to read the one page article. They then passed in the article before they were handed the print survey questionnaire. This ensured that they did not refer to the content while completing the questionnaire.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Merrill College of Journalism administrators are responsible for dividing the students into discussion groups.

were told to explicitly mention this in order to spur incentive to thoroughly complete each questionnaire. The teaching assistants also passed out consent forms to those sections taking the skills assessment test.

On December 18<sup>th</sup>, the first half of the two-hour J175 final was reserved for the second administering of the media literacy skills assessment test to the experimental group. The students were provided consent forms and pre-test surveys as they walked into the auditorium. They were told to take ten minutes to fill in the forms. After collecting these forms, the test-taking procedure was explained to the students. They were told that for each section (TV/Radio/Print) they would receive five points towards their final exams. They would not be graded on the content of the test but on the thoroughness and completion of their answers. As 62 of the students were taking this test for a second time, the researcher made the announcement that although some students had seen this test in the past, they were required to retake it and answer as thoroughly as possible. After the first hour of the J175 final exam, the participants handed in their last questionnaire and continued with the second half of the final exam.

All 170 experimental group subjects completed the skills assessment test in December. Of the 170 students, 108 made-up the post-only experimental group. The experimental group took the test in pre-post/post-only format to ensure that differences in skill attainment were based on the curriculum and not on differing critical media skill levels at the onset of the J175 course. Chapter 4 elaborates on the experimental group breakdown.

On November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup>, the control group participants from the College of Education took the media literacy skills assessment test. These students were told that taking the test was part of their class participation. Two of the three teachers chose to offer extra credit to those students who participated. The control group participants took the skills assessment test in exactly the same way as the experimental group. The order of media exposure was also randomly rotated.

All data was collected in an accurate and rigorous manner. All consent forms were collected and saved. Full confidentiality was guaranteed. All participants completed all parts of the experiment, and those who could not complete parts or all for some reason were excluded at no consequence to the study or their final course grade. Using the same media messages in both the first and second experiment sessions ensured that no outside influences or changes in the content influenced student responses.

Overall, the experimental data collection occurred with few hitches and no major setbacks.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis consisted of three parts. First, numeric associations were assigned for the pre-test survey (i.e. 1=female, 2=male; 1=freshman, 2=sophomore, 3=junior, 4=senior). Second, a coding protocol was built for the survey questionnaire answers. Third, the focus group sessions were taped and transcribed for careful and thorough analysis (explained in the following section).

Extensive coding protocols were built for the open-ended questions that measured comprehension, evaluation, and analysis.<sup>36</sup> The open-ended question codes were developed exclusively by the researcher. A sample of 90 questionnaires—30 TV, 30 print, 30 radio—were randomly selected for construction of a coding protocol. Based on the range of answers provided by the participants, a coding protocol was meticulously constructed, revised, and sharpened throughout fall semester 2006.

The open-ended codes were developed in the form of a 5-point scale. The scale ranged from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). The codes were developed to score comprehension, evaluation, and analysis answers to the questions. Three specific foundations for media skill assessment were used to aid their construction.

First, Edward Arke's (2005) dissertation titled "Media Literacy and Critical Thinking: Is there a connection?" provided the question format adopted for this dissertation. Arke, Professor and Chair of the Communication Department at Messiah College in Pennsylvania, adapted past media literacy skills assessment tests (Quin & McMahon, 1991; Hobbs and Frost, 2003) to develop his questionnaire. Arke's questionnaire was further adapted for use in this dissertation.<sup>37</sup> The questions are generally well-known in the media literacy field. They are also the only media literacy assessment markers that have attempted to empirically measure the effectiveness of a media literacy curriculum on any level of education.

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<sup>36</sup> See Appendix F for the coding protocol.

<sup>37</sup> Professor Arke was very generous in providing constructive feedback and insight for this dissertation on numerous occasions.

Second, Canadian media educator Chris Worsnop, in his 1997 book, *Assessing Media Work*, developed a six-level scale for general media assessment. He called his scale, “The Assessment Scale for Response to Media Texts.” Worsnop’s scale consists of six levels; numbered 0 through 5 (see Table 6). While the coding protocol developed for this dissertation was specifically constructed to address the media messages used in this dissertation, Worsnop’s (1997, p. 76) assessment scale provided a sound theoretical framework.<sup>38</sup>

**Table 5**

<b>Worsnop’s Assessment Scale for Response to Media Texts</b>
5—the student integrates personal feelings, reflections and beliefs within the text of their response. The personal response is rooted in the text, has a clear level of understanding of the whole text, and makes connections to other texts.
4—the student connects personal feelings, reflections and beliefs within the text of their response. The personal response refers to the text and conveys a sense of understanding of the text.
3—the student begins to explore personal feelings, reflections and beliefs within the text of their response. The response also makes some connection to the text and is not solely opinion.
2—the student essentially retells or paraphrases the text or makes reference only superficially to personal feelings or experiences. Or the student writes about personal feelings or opinion without connecting to or referring to the text.
1—the student response shows little or no interaction with or understanding of the text.
0—the student response is irrelevant, incomprehensible or nonexistent.

Third, the codes developed for this dissertation were also derived from a set of questions a media literate person should be familiar with. These questions were developed in 1992 by Renee Hobbs, Associate Professor and Director of the Media Education Lab at

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<sup>38</sup> Worsnop’s codes are general and sometimes too broad to deconstruct, but offer a platform from which specification and adoption can occur.

Temple University, in partial conjunction with the Aspen Institute's media literacy conference in Baltimore. Hobbs, at that time with the Media Literacy Project at Babson College in Massachusetts, drafted a list of questions that a media audience should consider when viewing a media message(s):

1. Who is the author and what is the purpose?
2. What techniques are used to attract attention?
3. What lifestyles, values, and points of views are represented?
4. How might different people interpret messages differently?
5. What is omitted from the message? (Hobbs, 1998, from Damico, 2004, p. 2).

These questions were instrumental for the construction of this study's coding protocol that identified critical skills attainment across TV, radio, and print media messages.

It is also important to mention a text that was attained after the codes for this dissertation were developed and disseminated to the coders. In 2006 William G. Christ, Professor at Trinity College in Texas and seminal media literacy scholar, edited a book titled, *Assessing Media Education: A Resource Handbook for Educators and Administrators*.

This text is highly relevant to assessment frameworks for media literacy in higher education. Its various frameworks and models nicely correlate with the assessment codes developed for this dissertation. Christ's text is mentioned in detail in the conclusions section (Chapter 7) of this dissertation.

Once the codes were completed, the survey questionnaire answers were organized and released to the coders on December 20<sup>th</sup>. Two students, both upper-class undergraduate psychology majors with past coding experience were employed for coding. They were each paid 200 dollars for roughly 25 hours of work.

Initially, the coders were each given 30 questionnaires—10 print, 10 radio, 10 TV—and the final codes developed for this dissertation. They coded and returned these questionnaires in January 2006. Based on their initial coding, inter-coder reliability was established. Chronbach's Alpha (1951) of inter-rater reliability statistic, also used by Hobbs and Frost (2003), is known to be highly reliable for experimental coder reliability. Chronbach's Alpha's range from .76 to .84 for the five open-ended questions coded for in this dissertation. This is considered reliable for inter-coder reliability (Bland & Altman, 1997), and established a means to continue the study with a confident level of accuracy. After this statistic was attained, the coders were provided with their allotment of survey questionnaires and told they could begin coding.

Comprehension, evaluation, and analysis are primarily qualitative terms. Their quantitative measurements cannot be entirely isolated from discussions of what these terms mean and how they are conceptualized. Engaging in such a discussion is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, these terms have been developed by media literacy educators and are considered central outcomes of media literacy education. They are often referred to in media literacy scholarship.

Comprehension was measured by the ability to summarize the message using the 5 W's (who, what, when, where, why), and H (how) format. For example, a student who achieved a high comprehension score provided the following summary of the *Time Magainze* one-page article on the Vail Company's wind power credit plan:

The Vail Ski Company is purchasing wind power credits from the Renewable Energy Source in order to change their form of electricity use. Although this form is more economical, it is also more expensive. The Vail Company intends to do this by this year to all their resorts in the West and 128 retail stores as well.

An example of a student who scored average on the print comprehension question provided the following answer: “Vail Resorts Inc. purchased wind power credits in Boulder to offset energy costs.” This response does not engage with the five W’s and H completely, but reflects basic attributes of comprehension.

Evaluation was measured by the ability to explain a specific message’s influence on the issue at hand and how the message personally influenced the viewer. An answer that reflected strong evaluation skill was evidenced by a student response to a question concerning what the NPR *News & Notes* audio clip suggested about sexually explicit lyrics and teens:

I feel sex and images of sex are readily available in all forms of media. It is unfair to try and blame solely hip-hop for the increase in teen sexual behavior when anyone any age can turn on the television, radio, or computer and see sex or something sexual. Sex, among other things, is just socially acceptable.

An example of an average student response to an evaluation question, in response to the CBS clip about the effectiveness of terrorism response tactics in the United States, reads: “This information suggests that terrorist prevention is effective, yet it is difficult for prevention agencies to determine what truly is a threat and what constitutes a phony threat.” An example of an answer that scored low on evaluation does not signal engagement with any text or message whatsoever. In response to a question concerning how the NPR audio clip influenced the student’s view, he or she wrote: “Hasn’t at all.”

Lastly, analysis was measured by the ability to identify the origination of the information, who the message is aimed at, and what information or points of view are omitted from the message. Answers that reflected a high analysis score provided thorough and insightful responses. Wrote one student in response to a question about NPR's audio clip on sexually explicit lyrics and teen sex:

The senders of this message are the radio host, the magazine editor Danielle Smith, and Steven Martino. This information originated from a study that Martino and the Rand Foundation conducted.

In response to what information or points of view may be missing from this message, the student wrote: "What may be missing is the point of view of the rappers whose songs have explicit lyrics." These answers reflect a thought process indicative of an analytical answer.

Alternatively, low analytical scores showed little engagement with the topic or question.

In response to identifying the sender of the message and the origination of the information for the TV clip about the NYC subway scare, a student wrote, "CBS." When asked what information or points of view were missing from the message, the student responded, "no information was left out." Such responses reflect little attempt to analyze a media message.

Comprehension, evaluation, and analysis, taken aggregately, reflect the critical skills that media literacy aims to breed in individuals.<sup>39</sup> They were utilized to evaluate the learning outcomes of the J175 course. In the results reported, (Chapter 4) these skills will be analyzed aggregately to reflect a “media literacy skill” score.

### ***Statistical Reporting***

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software program was used to analyze the data. Once the coded data were returned to the researcher, they were entered into SPSS. The results of the data analysis reaffirm the accuracy of the experiment procedure and the meticulous planning that allowed such figures to be attained.

T-tests were used to analyze measures of covariance. As the groups were separate entities, the t-test was the strongest predictor for comparing distribution means to infer that the means of the corresponding populations also differed (George & Mallery, 2003). T-tests, in this case, compared the average test scores of the participants. Test scores were compared between the experimental group before and after, and against the control group. These tests were used to explore five hypotheses stated in Chapter 4.

### ***Focus Groups***<sup>40</sup>

The focus group discussion sessions produced arguably the most prescient data for this dissertation. They did so for one overarching reason. The experiment, while measuring the effectiveness of the media literacy curriculum on skill attainment, did not address how the students were personally affected by such critical exposure to media.

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<sup>39</sup> Production, the “fourth” media literacy skill, was not measured here, as the resources were not available in a media literacy course of such size and organization.

<sup>40</sup> See Appendix G for focus group rationale and complete session protocol.

Experiments rarely address how personal beliefs, values, and opinions are influenced by exposure to new information. The focus groups shared *perspectives, views, attitudes, beliefs, responses, motivations and perceptions* (Litosseliti, 2003) on media's role in society and its civic and democratic functions. This exercise proved invaluable in attaining key insights into what the students were learning in the course. Media literacy education prides itself on enabling conceptual student-centered learning outcomes. Focus groups have the ability to approach such outcomes through student reflection, opinion, and attitudes.

### ***The Sessions***

Three focus groups were conducted during the week of December 4<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup>. Two sessions (n=10, n=8) were conducted with students from the J175 course. The third focus group (n=9) was conducted with students from the control group. Conducting focus group sessions with separate experimental and control groups allowed for qualitative comparisons of the values, beliefs and general assumptions between students enrolled in the J175 course and those who were not. The analysis further attempted to address “new ideas, issues, and themes” (Litoseletti, 2003, p. 92) of students' personal dispositions towards media. It also aimed to find inconsistencies, points of dispute, and the most contested areas of dialogue.

Each focus group participant was paid ten dollars and received free refreshments during the session.<sup>41</sup> Students who participated in the sessions signed consent forms and were guaranteed full confidentiality. They were also given the option to view the final write-up

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<sup>41</sup> All of the 239 participants were offered the chance to sign up for a focus group session. The initial fear of having to pay \$2,400.00 for 24 focus group sessions, and provide snacks, quickly subsided after only 27 students signed up to participate.

of the session, and provided the email address of the moderator for follow-up purposes. Each session lasted sixty minutes.

The focus groups were structured in two parts. The first 45 minutes of each session explored relevance in news coverage, credibility of media, and students as media consumers. This part of the focus groups attempted to gauge personal student views on media's roles and responsibilities in society. The last fifteen minutes of each session was devoted to media education. These concluding discussions centered on how education about media may influence one's ability to intelligently interact with media. The topics were organized as follows:

*Relevance and Credibility (45 minutes)*

- *Relevance*: Do media do a good job in providing relevant information for Americans?
- *Credibility*: How credible, unbiased, and neutral are media in the United States?
- *Student attention to news media*: how much time do you spend with news? Do you think it has affected your views, opinions, outlooks?

*Media Literacy (15 minutes)*

- What do you think being a media literate person entails? Considering how much time you spend with media—do you think learning about media functions and practices would affect how you interact with media?

The focus group sessions were organized to allow students to critically and openly reflect on media's role in society. Discussing relevance and credibility first allowed personal views to be shared, contested, and debated. The later discussions let the students, immediately after critically discussing media, reflect on their ideas about media literacy's potential value. The overall aim of the focus groups was to elicit thoughtful and new ideas from loosely-structured conversations.

### **The Research Process**

The data collection process should illuminate the effectiveness of media literacy education on university-level undergraduate students. The data should also help explain the specific skills and dispositions students gained while enrolled in a media literacy course. Are they learning critical skills? Are they gaining greater understanding of media's social roles? Are they becoming more aware of the cultural and ideological implications of the media? Are they learning anything at all?

Empirical data can rigorously measure cause and effect, but rarely can it comment on personal shifts in personal dispositions. Qualitative inquiries, meanwhile, are rarely able to be generalized beyond those who participate in the research. Utilizing both an experiment and focus groups allowed this dissertation to gain information that is both statistically sound and experientially illuminating. As Part Two will show, both types of data were vital to the results of the study.

Four practical outcomes are expected from the data gathered and analyzed:

1. To initiate a discussion concerning media literacy education in the university from a learning outcomes perspective.
2. To offer an entryway for future media literacy researchers to conduct data analysis, challenge existing media education practices, and expand on media education theory in general.
3. To offer curricular frameworks that address the holistic outcomes of a successful media literacy curriculum.
4. To provide a platform for university administrators and educators looking to implement, expand, or refocus university media literacy initiatives.

These four practical outcomes can be achieved through a study that proves rigorous in methodology, sound in approach, and transferable in scope. Furthermore, in sharing the results of this study with the larger scholarly community of media and education academics, media literacy's visibility in higher education should increase.

## **PART TWO – A TALE OF TWO HALVES**

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### **CHAPTER 4**

#### **INCREASED CRITICAL MEDIA SKILLS**

##### **Does Media Literacy Work?**

Teaching students to be critical media consumers is not specific to media literacy education but a general aim of all media education. At a very base level, successful post-secondary media studies must teach students the critical skills needed to effectively view media. Where media literacy becomes unique is in its aim to connect critical analysis skills to an understanding of media's larger political and ideological implications (Kellner & Share, 2005). Media literate students are bred to become aware individuals, able to detect and decipher the overarching and underlying implications of media messages. Chris Worsnop (2004) writes about what such transfer can accomplish:

Good media education courses do not focus on propagandizing students into a single way of thinking. They provide students with a broad range of critical and analytical skills to help them make their own choices and decisions about the ideological and political messages surrounding them in 21<sup>st</sup> century culture (p. 1).

Media literacy is first and foremost a skills-based learning experience. It stresses teaching critical evaluation, comprehension, analysis, and production of media messages in print, audio and visual form (Masterman, 1985). The empirical findings of this dissertation explore critical skill attainment, as addressed by the first general research question:

Q1. How does media literacy education affect undergraduate university students' media comprehension, evaluation, and analysis skills?

The results prove that students who enrolled in and successfully completed the J175 course gained greater media comprehension, evaluation, and analysis skills. These skills, however, are not the end goal. Rather, they are only the first-half of the media literacy story. For although the students, as expected, gained the ability to critically evaluate media, a larger question still looms: So what?

### **Measuring Media Literacy: Comprehension, Evaluation, and Analysis**

What constitutes a media literacy learning experience is often a topic of debate and disagreement (Kubey, 1998; Mihailidis, 2006). Nevertheless, a general set of skills have been identified as the core attributes of media literacy education the United States (Scharrer, 2006). These skills—comprehension, analysis, evaluation, and production—are commonly seen as the definitive learning outcomes for media literacy. Without proving that media literacy first and foremost effectively teaches these skills, the connections between critical skills and critical understanding of media, which make media literacy unique, can not be explored.

The experimental results were analyzed aggregately to reflect a “media literacy” skills score. This decision was made for two reasons. First, this study is not interested in addressing the intricacies involved in how students attain a specific critical media skill. Commenting on comprehension versus analysis versus evaluation would lead to a larger discussion on how students learn, and what educational techniques influence them more than others. Second, as media literacy is based on learning outcomes, this dissertation

attempted to discuss media literacy as a whole, and not media literacy in terms of specific and separate skills. Analyzing the separate skills students learn would force content to become a predominant factor in skill attainment.

The intention of this dissertation was two-fold—to detect whether students attained greater media literacy skills and to assess whether those skills gave the students a commensurately greater ability to appreciate and support the essential role media plays in civic and democratic life. Skill attainment does reflect an ability to critically view a message. However, knowing whether those skills have been attained does not automatically help a researcher understand how those skills influence students' opinions about the value of media to society.

#### ***Four Groups/Five Hypotheses***

The research design divided the 239 subjects into four groups. Five hypotheses measured differences in media literacy skills attained. The skills assessment tests compared average test scores between the four groups to assess whether there were significant differences between students who took the test before and after the course, and those who never took the course, or any similar courses.

#### ***Four Groups***

1. *No-course* (n=69): This was the control group. It consisted of 69 students from the College of Education at the University of Maryland. These students took the skills assessment test in November 2006.

2. *Pre-course* (n=62):<sup>42</sup> These students were enrolled in the J175 course and completed the skills assessment test at the beginning of the fall semester 2006.
3. *Post-course*\*<sup>43</sup> (n=62): These are the same students who were in the *pre-course* group. They completed the skills assessment test at both the beginning and end of the J175 course.
4. *Post-course only* (n=108): These were students enrolled in the J175 course who took the skills assessment test only at the conclusion of the course in December 2006.

### ***Five Hypotheses***<sup>44</sup>

*Hypothesis One:* The average test scores of students who did not participate in the course will not be different from the average test scores of students who took the skills assessment test before the start of the J175 course. The subscripts *no-course* and *pre-course* indicate students that did not take the course at all and students that took the test before taking the course, respectively.

$$H_0: \mu_{\text{no-course}} = \mu_{\text{pre-course}}$$

$$H_1: \mu_{\text{no-course}} \neq \mu_{\text{pre-course}}$$

*Hypothesis Two:* There will be a statistically significant relationship between the average test scores of the students who took the skills assessment test both at the beginning and end of the *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* course.

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<sup>42</sup> Groups Two and Three consisted of the same students. They completed the skills assessment test both at the beginning and end of the semester. There was a mortality rate of 17 in this group.

<sup>43</sup> The \* designates that this group comprises students who took the test twice.

<sup>44</sup>  $\mu$  denotes the average test scores of the populations.

$$H_0: \mu_{\text{pre-course}} \geq \mu_{\text{post-course}}^*$$

$$H_2: \mu_{\text{pre-course}} < \mu_{\text{post-course}}^*$$

*Hypothesis Three:* There will be a statistically significant relationship between the average test scores of the students who took the skills assessment test at the beginning of the course and the students who *only* took the skills assessment test at the end of the course.

$$H_0: \mu_{\text{pre-course}} \geq \mu_{\text{post-course only}}$$

$$H_3: \mu_{\text{pre-course}} < \mu_{\text{post-course only}}$$

*Hypothesis Four:* There will not be a statistically significant relationship between the average test scores of the students who took the skills assessment test at the end of class *for the second time* and the students who *only* took the skills assessment test at the end of the course.

$$H_0: \mu_{\text{post-course}}^* = \mu_{\text{post-course only}}$$

$$H_4: \mu_{\text{post-course}}^* \neq \mu_{\text{post-course only}}$$

*Hypothesis Five:* There will be a statistically significant relationship between the average test scores of the students who did not take the course and the students who *only* took the skills assessment test at the end of the course.

$$H_0: \mu_{\text{no-course}} \geq \mu_{\text{post-course only}}$$

$$H_5: \mu_{\text{no-course}} < \mu_{\text{post-course only}}$$

## **Demographics of the Sample**

The pre-test survey revealed significant evidence for a comparable sample population. The sample, taken as an aggregate, shows that the students involved in the study were for the most part at the beginning of their college career, not predominantly female or male, and almost exclusively in the 18-24 year-old age bracket.

### ***The Complete Sample***

Of the 239 students who participated in the experiment, there were 119 (49.5%) freshmen, 61 (25.5%) sophomores, 44 (18.4%) juniors, and 15 (6.4%) seniors. 233 of the 239 (97.5%) students were between 18-24 years old. The sample consisted of 146 (61%) females and 93 (39%) males. Of these, 59% were white/Caucasian, 20% African American, 12% Asian, and 6% Latino. The remaining 3% of the sample reported their ethnicity as Native American, Pacific Islander, or Other.

Concerning media use—how much time students spend with media—109 (45.6%) students considered themselves light media users (0-3 hours per day), while 121 (50.6%) reported using media 4-7 hours per day. Just under half of the students (47.7%) said they had no prior media education instruction, while the majority of the remaining sample (33%) claimed to have little informal exposure to education about the media.

Interestingly, over 68% of the sample claimed to read the newspaper, of which 72% claimed to read it “here and there.” This is an interesting statistic in that during the focus group discussions not one participant claimed to receive news via a newspaper. Such a statistic could be the result of a self-reporting bias.

Other statistics from the survey reported that roughly 40% of the participants claimed to have voted, while around 25% of the sample reported belonging to a volunteer organization.

The empirical data analysis was dependent on reasonable comparability between both the students who were enrolled in the J175 course and those who were not, and across the entire sample as a whole. A representative sample must have as few externalities as possible so as to minimize any inconsistencies that may influence the validity of the results. In this case, the descriptive statistics reinforced demographic consistency among all groups.

### ***Group Demographics***

A comparable base between the experimental and control group was further justified by analyzing the variables among the four groups.

*Class Standing* - 59% (41) of the *no-course* (control) group were freshmen, compared to 56% (35) of the *pre-course* group, and 39% (43) of the *post-course only* group. A slight majority of the students were freshmen. The lower number of freshmen in the *post-course only* group was a random outcome of the selection of *post-course only* and *pre-course* media literacy groups. However, 37% (40) of the *post-course only* group students were sophomores, which was a large percentage compared to the other groups.

*Gender* – Gender created the largest discrepancy between the control and experimental groups. Of the 69 students in the *no-course* group, 55 (79%) were female. Meanwhile, 53% of both the *pre-course* and *post-course only* groups were female. A majority (61%) of students were female, which was a positive correlation between the experimental and control groups. The difference in the percentage of students being female between the experimental and control groups could be a limiting implication for this analysis. It is an area that should be explored further in subsequent studies.

*Age* – As anticipated, a significant majority of the sample population were within the age range that this study targeted. All but six of the students were between 18-24 years of age. One student in the *no course* group was over 24, and five in the *post-course only* group were over 24.

*Ethnicity* – Two-thirds (66.7%) of the *no-course* group were white/Caucasian, while just over half of the *pre-course* and *post-course only* groups were white/Caucasian.

Aggregately, the groups consisted of 20% African American participants. The remaining participants' ethnicities were evenly spread among numerous categories. Ethnicity can be a strong predictor for variation in results if the sample is highly skewed towards one ethnic group. This sample, however, reflected the diversity of the University of Maryland campus.

*Previous Media Literacy Education* – Previous media literacy education can be a predictor for variations in this test. For the experimental groups, exposure meant that the

media literacy curriculum, as the independent variable testing skills, would not be as strong. For the control group, extensive previous media literacy education could influence their scores on the skills assessment test. The pre-test survey revealed similar and reassuring results. Approximately 50% of all groups claimed to have no previous media literacy education. Around one-third of both the experimental group and control group claimed to have some informal media education in the past. The remaining students claimed to have enrolled in one formal class. This variable is somewhat elusive. First, students could have interpreted ‘media literacy’ as many different things<sup>45</sup> and thus reported courses in which they had one week training with newspapers as some exposure. This type of experience would not significantly affect the data collection and results of the skills assessment test. Second, students may have had exposure in middle school, high school, or the previous summer at the University of Maryland. Time of last exposure would also affect retention of the media skills gained.

This variable was included to attain a sense of how students reported about the term media literacy. Warning signs would have occurred if there were no reporting of any prior media education experience, or if all participants were reporting prior engagement with media literacy. However, the relative blandness of the self-reports reinforces a general lack of significant prior education.

*Media Consumption* – The media consumption variable was used to make general connections between time spent with media and media skills attainment. 38 of the 69

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<sup>45</sup> Future assessments of media literacy may be best suited to approach the discipline by attempting to find definitions of media literacy. As this study was measuring the effectiveness of a media literacy curriculum, it did not address this issue until the qualitative focus group discussions.

(55.1%) control group students claimed to be light media users, while 29 students (42%) claimed to use media 4-7 hours per day. Of the 62 *pre-course* group students, 27 (43.5%) claimed to be light media users, while 33 (53.2%) students reported using media 4-7 hours per day. The *post-course only* group had similar results, with 40.7% of its participants claiming to be light media users, and 54.6% reporting to be medium-level daily media users. Very few students (ten in the entire sample) claimed to use media eight or more hours per day. Grounds for correlation do exist, in that the experimental group students claimed to spend more time with media on the whole.<sup>46</sup> The results will show that they also scored higher on the skills assessment test.

*University Major* – A large majority of the participants, approximately 75%, reported having “undecided/undeclared/none” as their major track of study. The lack of defined majors helped this sample attain a level of variety. As the *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* course is not offered to students enrolled in the College of Journalism, its students were concentrating in a number of different disciplines. This was somewhat predictable as it was anticipated in the initial study design. In each fall semester, J175 is first open to incoming freshmen. If there are any available seats after the enrollment period, upperclassmen may sign up for the course. This was also taken into consideration when deciding when to collect data. The control group, however, was somewhat unpredictable, but the outcome was almost a mirror of the experimental group. 54 of the 69 (78.3%) control group students claimed to be undecided in their choice of study. Assertions could be made about samples with participants representing a particular

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<sup>46</sup> This trend was expected, as the students from the media literacy course were spending more time engaged with media both in class and doing homework.

choice of study. However, the variety in this sample allowed for the variable to reflect a diverse student population.

*Voting* – Voting can be a strong predictor for civic awareness and participation. Scholars (McDevitt & Kiouisis, 2006; Kiouisis, McDevitt & Wu, 2005; Milner, 2002; Youniss et al, 2002; Putnam, 2000) have used voting as a main predictor for general interest in political and democratic events. Approximately 40% of the control group and 40% of the experimental group reported voting in the past. This equal distribution suggests that neither group had greater involvement with democratic participation. This variable may also be limited due to the fact that most of the participants were in their first and second year of studies at Maryland. Therefore, they may not have yet been of age to vote in the 2004 election, even if they wanted to. Such motivation, while not measured for this study, may be a limiting factor, however insignificantly, in the results analysis.

*Volunteer Efforts* – Volunteer efforts, such as voting, are also a strong predictor of civic participation. 29 (42%) control group students claimed to have volunteered with an organization in the past. Only 35 (39.9%) experimental group students claimed to have volunteered in the past. This may have implications for the cynicism and negativity expressed in the focus group discussion sections explained in Chapter 5. Volunteering can be seen as a qualitative predictor of societal views and dispositions, which may have consequences for how students see media's role in society.

*Remaining Variables* – The remaining variables, specifically whether students read the newspaper, where they attended high school, and their parents' level of education, were also representative of a diverse sample.

The descriptive statistics helped reinforce grounds for comparison. Students in both the experimental group and the control group shared many qualitative attributes as described above. No variables skewed the separate groups to a point of concern for the overall power of the results. These variables were used to make inferences on the experimental results.

### **Students Reflect Skill Attainment**

Hypothesis one tested if, on average, the test scores of the *no-course* (control) group differed from the test scores of the *pre-course* experimental group. If the null failed to be rejected in the first hypothesis, it would provide a baseline to judge the effects of the media literacy course on skill assessment test grades. The presumption was that there would be no statistical difference between the average test scores of the two groups. If so, normalization between the groups could be assumed and the analysis could proceed to compare the average test scores of the groups.

An independent samples t-test was used to compare the means of the two average grade scores on the skills assessment test. The t-test was run for each separate medium (TV, radio, print) and for the total scores of the three mediums combined. This score is referred to as the *media literacy score*.

The results strongly confirmed a baseline for comparison. The *no-course* group and the *pre-course* group, across all three mediums and in total, revealed no significant difference in average test scores. The data analyses revealed that the *no-course* group ( $M=40.16$ ,  $SD=5.209$ ) and the *pre-course* group ( $M=40.89$ ,  $SD=3.6$ ) showed no significant difference in average media literacy skills assessment test scores,  $t(62)=.933$ , at  $p < .05$ .

Hypothesis one, then, led to a failure to reject the null. Students entering the media literacy course, and those who never took the course but completed the test, had no significant difference in average test scores. Thus, a direct comparison of the groups occurred with confidence.

Hypothesis two assumed there would be a statistically significant relationship of average test scores between the *pre-course* and the *post-course*<sup>\*47</sup> groups. The hypothesis assumed that media literacy skills were attained through the course curriculum. The *pre-course* group students (also *post-course*\*) were predominantly freshmen (56.5%), almost evenly divided in gender (53.2% women), and approximately half were white/Caucasian. Based on the sample normalization achieved via the failure to reject the null in hypothesis one, the differences in *pre-course/post-course*\* average test scores were representative of media literacy skills attainment (comprehension, analysis, evaluation).

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<sup>47</sup> These groups consist of the same 62 subjects, but 124 observations, as each subject took the skills assessment test both at the beginning and end of the treatment (*Journalism 175: Media Literacy*).

The t-test revealed that in all cases, significant differences were attained. The overall average media literacy score for the *pre-course* group ( $M=40.89$ ,  $SD=3.6$ ) and the *post-course\** group ( $M=45.98$ ,  $SD=4.4$ ),  $t(62) = -6.94$   $p < .001$ , revealed a statistically significant difference in average test scores. This also occurred with similar strength ( $p < .001$ ) in TV ( $t= -4.705$ ), radio ( $t= -6.170$ ) and print ( $t= -5.552$ ) average scores. Such findings showed that significant improvement was made in skill attainment from the beginning of the media literacy course to the end. Concerning hypothesis two then, the null was rejected.

The outcome of hypothesis two could have been weakened by the fact that the *pre-course* group could have simply remembered the skills assessment test, as they were exposed to the same exact test in both experiment infusions in September and December of 2006. Hypothesis three, however, proved that the curriculum, and not student recall, was the catalyst for increased skill attainment.

Hypothesis three posited that there would be a statistically significant difference in the average test scores of the *pre-course* group and the *post-course only* group. This hypothesis was tested in order to show that the curriculum was the key for the increase in test scores, and not outlying factors such as memory recall and repetition. The *post-course only* group was the largest of the groups. This group took the skills assessment test only at the conclusion of the course. The *post-course only* group was comparable to the *pre-course* group, in that it also consisted of slightly more females (53.7%), and most

were freshmen (39.8%) and sophomores (37%). Yet again, the comparison reinforced the effects of a media literacy curriculum.

The *pre-test* group's ( $M=40.89$ ,  $SD=3.6$ ) average total media literacy test scores were significantly lower than the *post-course only* group ( $M=44.96$ ,  $SD=4.5$ ),  $t(108) = -6.193$ , at  $p < .001$ . This result again proves that the difference, across all media formats, was significant, and not extensively a cause of externalities.

Concerning hypothesis three, then, the null hypothesis was rejected, in that grounds for difference in average test scores were apparent.

The fourth hypothesis stated that there would be no significant difference in the average test scores between the *post-course\** group and the *post-course only* group. This hypothesis was posed to further reinforce that the cause for increased skill attainment was due to the course, and not prior access to the test or any other outlying variables.

Although the *post-course\** group with prior exposure to the test scored slightly better on average total media literacy skill grade (*post-course*  $M=45.98$ , *post-course only*  $M=44.96$ ), no significant difference could be proven. These groups took the test at the same time, during the J175 final exam in December 2006.

The data analyses revealed that the *post-course\** group ( $M=45.98$ ,  $SD=4.4$ ) and the *post-course only* group ( $M=44.96$ ,  $SD=4.5$ ) showed no significant difference in average media literacy skills assessment test scores,  $t(108)=1.437$ , at  $p < .05$ . These results failed to

reject the null hypothesis. Such a result proved that, on average, all students exposed to the media literacy curriculum increased their comprehension, evaluation, and analysis skills pertaining to print, video, and audio media.

The fifth hypothesis stated that there would be a significant difference in the average test scores of the *no-course* group and the *post-course only* group. The null hypothesis was also rejected here, as the results confirmed significant differences in the average test scores across all media formats and in total media literacy scores between students who had not enrolled in the media literacy class ( $M=40.16$ ,  $SD=5.209$ ), and those who had ( $M=44.96$ ,  $SD=4.449$ ),  $t(108)=-6.326$ , at  $p < .001$ .

This comparison further reinforced the overall trend in the statistical analyses. The students who enrolled in and completed the media literacy course increased their critical media viewing skills during the semester compared to both their earlier scores and the scores by a group of comparable students who had not enrolled in the media literacy course.

### **Implications of the Five Hypotheses**

All five hypotheses were confirmed. This, by and large, was no great surprise. Students enrolled in a media literacy course increased their media comprehension, analysis, and evaluation skills. They did so uniformly and across TV, radio, and print media. The results proved that the first half of the post-secondary media literacy educational experience was effective. Students gained the skills that the field deems necessary attributes of a media literate individual.

These results also help build a picture of media literacy's effectiveness in higher education. The empirical data results were not an end but rather a beginning. They provided sound evidence for further exploration into the influence that such skill attainment actually had on what students took away from a media literacy course. The concern was that if the skill attainment displayed here was not operationalized through critical awareness of media, skill attainment would be rendered ineffective.

Before discussing the qualitative findings, a summary of the key outcomes should help benefit the discussions in the following chapters. The key outcomes from the quasi-experiment are:

- Students did not perform better in any one specific area or with one media format. The results show that comprehension (summarize the message), evaluation (how does the message inform the topic and what you think about the topic), and analysis (who is the message aimed at; what is omitted from the message) increased across TV, radio, and print media formats.
- The experimental results pointed to a skill attainment not unique to media literacy education. The participants' increases in media skills were reflective of a general educational outcome of all media studies. However, this increase shows that the educational outcomes of the *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* course were widely achieved.
- The rigor of the experimental design allowed for further exploration into the increase in media comprehension, evaluation and analysis skills. The pre-

post/post-only and post-only control group design justified the normalization of the groups and the ensuing cross-group comparison.

- The control group's participation allowed the qualitative exploration to expand beyond those in the media literacy course. The control group average test scores were very similar to the *pre-course* group. Their descriptive backgrounds were also similar to the J175 students. Such similarities further justified the increased media literacy skills based on the enrollment in the media literacy course.
- The holistic and uniform increase in skill attainment allows for further investigation into student perceptions of the ideological, social, and democratic implications of media.

### **So They Learn More...Now What?**

Increases in media comprehension, evaluation and analysis are only one-half of the media literacy picture. Media literate individuals should be capable of applying their newfound skills to understand and critically engage with media's larger social and civic responsibilities. British media scholar Sonja Livingstone (2004a) has particularly attempted to advance media literacy beyond a skills-based approach:

...to focus solely on questions of skill or ability neglects the textuality and technology that mediates communication. In consequence, it unwittingly supports a universalist, cognitive framework, thereby neglecting in turn the historical and cultural contingency of both media and the social knowledge processes that interpret them (p. 8).

The media literacy movement in higher education has become prone to ignoring such connections, leading ultimately to the idea that "all media educators are media literacy

educators.” The problem with this assertion is that when taken at face value media literacy becomes muddled. This, as expressed in Chapter 2, compromises media literacy’s intended learning outcomes.

If every media educator is a media literacy educator, the term fades into obscurity and agnosticism. As Chapter 1 highlighted, the struggle to define media literacy education’s existence in higher education has caused considerable confusion as to what really constitutes a media literacy education. Perhaps a more important question for higher education is: What is the civic value of media literacy? That is the second half of the media literacy story, addressed in Chapter 5.

The results of the quasi-experiment successfully proved that students enrolled in a media literacy course increased their critical skills in media analysis across all media formats. Such results, however, failed to address the crux of the media literacy experience: does this skill attainment allow students to better understand the larger political, ideological and democratic complexities of the media?

The results of the qualitative discussions raise significant questions about whether larger connections are being made by the students in the media literacy course. Those who participated in the focus group discussions displayed negative attitudes towards media. They largely praised media literacy education, but could not positively connect what they had learned in the media literacy course with media’s civic and social implications. Their

opinions were not only negative, they also displayed little newfound knowledge about the value of a free press to civic democracy.

The views expressed by the students led to larger questions: Is media literacy breeding skeptics or cynics? Is media literacy empowering or inoculating students? Does media literacy help build media awareness or enhance apathetic dispositions towards media? Does media literacy education teach students to be responsible media consumers or careless media digesters?

The ideal outcome of a media literacy class is that: “students become subjects in the process of deconstructing injustices, expressing their own voices, and struggling to create a better society” (Kellner & Share, 2005, p. 382). The empirical results of this study are one step towards assessing the former, while the qualitative exploration examines if the latter goal occurs.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE UNINTENDED SIDE-EFFECTS OF MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION

#### **Do More Skills Equal More Understanding?**

Learning can rarely be objectified. Empirical evaluation, while efficient for measuring cause and effect, does less to address holistic, experiential, and qualitative learning outcomes. Standardized testing leaves much to be said about the opinions influenced, values shifted, and beliefs enriched through a learning experience. The statistical findings of this study mean little if they are not explained in the larger context of the ways in which critical skills affect understanding, awareness, and general dispositions towards media.

The focus groups explored connections on a personal level. The overarching aim of the discussion sessions was to detect how students understood media's role in civic life. The implicit assumption was that students with now stronger critical media skills would be more knowledgeable and aware of the necessity of a free press for democratic society. The patterns, connections, and emerging themes found throughout this qualitative exploration addressed the implications of the empirical findings, as expressed through the second research question:

Q2. How does media literacy education influence university students' understanding of media's roles and responsibilities in a democratic society?

This research question was the entry point for the second half of the media literacy story. After proving that critical skills were attained through the J175 course, the exploration shifted to an investigation of the larger relationships between media education and civic awareness.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the focus groups were structured in two parts. The first 45 minutes of the discussions dealt with media's role in society, specifically addressing *relevance, credibility, and students as news media consumers*. This part of the discussion entailed the bulk of the students' views on the media industry, its functions, patterns, and influences. The last fifteen minutes of each session were devoted to *media literacy*. These concluding discussions centered on the possible influences of formal education about media.

These substantive discussions should help expose what students personally took away from the J175 course beyond a newfound ability to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze media. The results were somewhat unexpected in light of the overall increases in critical media skills reflected through the quasi-experiment.

### **Student Perspectives in Two Topics**

Numerous similarities and differences were noted between the two experimental focus groups and the control focus group. Most importantly, and perhaps of concern, were the consistently negative views towards media expressed by the experimental group

students. These students, all from the *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* course, expressed the benefits of media literacy education and its influence on their relationship with media. They praised media literacy's ability to help them "look deeper" at media. However, when the conversation addressed media's influence on society and democracy, the students' cynical views overshadowed the substance of their conversation. They seemed empowered to be defensive against media.

Reasons for the experimental groups' negative responses can range from their heightened critical inquiry into media through the J175 course, to a general cynicism towards media functions by younger generations. Nevertheless, these sessions evoked interesting questions concerning the negativity displayed by the experimental groups. How much of a role did media literacy play in the students' negativity? Did the media literacy curriculum reinforce and exaggerate cynical and pessimistic ideas already instilled in students' minds? Or were the students simply unable to connect the skills they attained with a substantive understanding of media's democratic and social roles?

### ***Media Use***

Before the outcomes of the focus group sessions are discussed, it is important to note that of the 27 focus group participants, 26 mentioned the Internet as their primary source for local, national, and global events.<sup>48</sup> While this is not surprising in the least, it is interesting to note that of the 26 who mentioned primarily using the Internet to attain news, 24 only read the news bulletins that flashed on their email home page. The most frequent examples were: Yahoo (10), Comcast (9), and MSN (5).

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<sup>48</sup> The 27<sup>th</sup> student reported television as his or her primary method for news gathering.

While this study did not specifically aim to test news gathering preferences for students, this point is important for future discussions on the ideas inherent in this research, and similar studies on students and media. College students, as exemplified here, attain civic information as a subset of, or in conjunction with their use of media for personal tasks such as communication, research, and entertainment. The idea of media convergence, on the production side, has been well documented. On the user side it may stand to tell much about the types of media convergence the Internet has bred in younger populations and the possible influences of such a shift in news gathering methods. Henry Jenkins (2006) states in his introduction to *Convergence Culture*, “[Media] convergence alters the logic by which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment” (p. 15-16). The focus group participants read a few small headlines, most likely from *Reuters* or the *Associated Press*, while checking email and chatting with friends. This may have significant implications for what ensued in the discussions below.

### ***Topic One: Media’s Role in Democratic Society***

“*All news is biased news.*” –Student, *J175: Media Literacy* course-

At the beginning of each focus group, the students briefly introduced themselves and spoke about their personal media use. The discussions then shifted to media’s role in society. This part of the sessions was introduced through a brief overview by the moderator, followed by substantive discussions revolving around three specific topic areas:

- *Relevance*: Do media do a good job in providing relevant information for Americans?

- *Credibility*: How credible, unbiased and neutral are media in the United States?
- *Students' attention to news media*: How much time do you spend with news? Do you think it has affected your views, opinions, outlook?

These topics were strategically infused into the discussions, based on the specific progressions of the conversations. For example, students in one focus group began speaking about media relevance in terms of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* versus Bill O'Reilly's *The O'Reilly Factor* and Chris Matthews's *Hardball*. In another discussion, the topic was broached through a discussion of the coverage of Michael Richard's racial outburst during a stand-up comedy performance in Los Angeles in fall 2006. The resulting discussions were rich in opinion and diverse in viewpoints.

While all three groups engaged in substantive talk that resulted in a wide array of opinions and beliefs, a trend evolved from the conversations in the experimental group discussions. Both groups articulated predominantly negative views of media's role in society—they distrusted the media. These “media literate” students seemed to critically engage with media. This engagement, however, took the form of negative criticism rather than critical understanding. The students seemed empowered to be cynical.

### ***Relevance***

*I've never turned on the news and been like, wow, glad I watched that, made my day a whole lot better...or, like, felt informed about something relevant.”*

-Student, J175: *Media Literacy* course-

Media relevance is a qualitative construct, subject to a variety of definitions. “Relevance,” as used in this study, is meant to speak to American media's role in

providing its public with a diverse and wide spectrum of information from which it can make informed decisions. In the focus group discussions, students were asked about the relevance of media in society as a subset of how they viewed media in a broad and general sense. This topic was intended both to allow them to critically think about media's role in society, and to attempt to locate their opinions on how media influences values and viewpoints concerning civic issues.

The general consensus among both experimental groups and the control group was that media outlets rarely provided relevant information. "News outlets don't want to show you things that make the country look bad or themselves look bad," said a student from the J175 course. This was followed by another student stating: "I think the American people are just settling for what's on the television...they aren't going to dig deep to find more information if they aren't satisfied. They may complain and say, oh this isn't what's real, but they aren't going to go investigate it more. Everybody does this...so it doesn't really matter." Another student then stated: "I think media companies are concerned about losing viewers and money. They feel they can't make everyone happy, so they just pick a side and topics and gain those viewers."

The discussions on relevance predominantly focused on the business of the media industry, "real" versus entertainment news, and general public disinterest towards news media. During the discussion, a trend developed: the two experimental group discussions grew more negative towards media. The control group discussion, meanwhile, was less substantive but also less pessimistic. This growing difference was somewhat of a surprise

to the moderator. The experimental group discussions, at times, were rather absent of critical thought. They were more prone to rash statements and bold assertions, often unfounded. The control group students, not yet sensitized to the level of analysis offered in the J175 class, grasped the basic motives of media but refrained from apathetically accepting such existences.

### *Business and politics*

Students from both groups mentioned media's profit motives and political connections when discussing how and to what extent media cover events. The students continuously referred to the idea that profit and business models ruled news production to an end. This underlying theme quickly became a strong predictor of the overall negativity expressed in the group discussions. Remarkably one student from the experimental group: "America is a capitalist system, which is all about getting a better living status... They [the media industry] make more money the more people watch. It's not really what people need to watch or know, it's what they are going to watch that matters." The media industry is not exempt from profit models and motives in a free market society. In this light the student was entirely correct. What was interesting, however, was the tone with which he expressed a rather dreary train of thought. In discussing media relevance, this participant seemed content with the idea that relevance is not on the radar of mass media outlets. This tone was evident throughout the discussion.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> This may not be a reaction to media *per se*, but more a general disposition towards corporate business practices. In an age of Enron, Tyco, and a general wave of corporate corruption, the students seemed to have developed a pessimistic view of the profit motive in general. This is somewhat ironic. While they blamed media for seeking profits, they expressed profit motives as the main incentive for media companies, and as personal incentive for them to gain a university degree.

The control group discussion echoed the experimental groups' thoughts on profit motives in media: "But sensational headlines grab people's attention... They [television news media] will wait until the end to show the really important stuff," said one participant, "The stories will be placed as actual news to get our attention, we'll see other stories about 'real' issues. Or they will throw the 'other' stories in between 'real' stories to grab peoples' attention." Added another student, "even CNN is now getting into the entertainment news, so that people will start to pick it up: Brittany Spears, Brangelina, Kramer, they need to make money and keep audiences." Both groups' discussions were defeatist in a sense. There was little reflection or critical discussion about why profits were so central to media practices. One student from the control group, recapping a recent interaction with news media, stated:

Last week I watched news for an hour and a half, because before each commercial they showed a story about a deer who jumped through a window and attacked a family. And I watched traffic and weather and local news and stuff I really don't care about...just to get to the end and see the story about the deer. They hooked me in. It may not be right, but it's smart.

This student described a process used by television news media to keep her attention. She was cognizant of this action, and admitted that it was "smart" for the program to do so. Understanding such media workings and their rationale is a key to understanding the nuances of media and their intended effects. This type of acknowledgement and acceptance was rarely noticed in the focus group discussions. Students chose to simply state profit motives as negative influences on media, but rarely did they express why and to what effect these practices were put into place. Even after additional prodding by the moderator, the students' responded by stating more examples of profit motives in the media industry to justify their outlooks.

When the conversations shifted from profits to politics, students from both the experimental groups and the control group used politics to discredit relevance in media coverage and news reporting. However, as the conversations advanced, the experimental group discussions became noticeably more negative and conspiratorial and less constructive than the control group. Said one student from the J175 course about the political relevance of news coverage:

I have this theory that the media is much more about money and control than anything. For example, they will tell you about local shootings to scare you and keep order, to vote for the representative who will fight crime. And not care about Darfur, because that means we have to care more about foreign diplomacy and cut back on military spending and stuff.

A student immediately followed this statement by asking the group if they had “ever visited a web site that lists the top 100 media companies in the U.S. and how they are connected to politicians. The majority of the largest corporations are connected.”<sup>50</sup> It is difficult and complex to pinpoint where such thought originates. While such ideas and opinions should be part of any discussion on media relevance and news selection, they should not be the dominant and lone point of a discussion on media’s relevance to society. This was absent from both experimental group conversations. Further, there were no dissenters to such cynical views. After continued prodding by the moderator as to what such connections mean, the participants in both experimental groups responded with further negative and conspiratorial comments. The topic was not what concerned the moderator, but moreover it was the inability of the experimental groups to acknowledge or include the value of media for informed civic participation.

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<sup>50</sup> The student called the site “theyrule.com.” This site could not be located by the researcher.

One particular discussion thread by an experimental group began with intelligent and sharp introspection. Said one student: “I mean, I do care, but I think people are ostracized because of politics getting in the way of news. CNN probably didn’t support Kevin Sites [of Yahoo News’s *Kevin Sites in the Hot Zone*]<sup>51</sup> because of the political implications.”

Another student followed this by stating:

I mean it’s just that the media is owned by so few. I think its like six corporations or something. So when Disney tells you something, you’re going to hear it on all their media stations. And the majority of the news stations don’t want to hire Kevin Sites, who’s going to film people shooting people, and news that people may really care about.

In this short conversation, participants from the media literacy class engaged in analytical critique and thoughtful discussions. In discussing the global reporting of journalist Kevin Sites, students began to question why such journalism was rarely if ever part of the mainstream media. They pondered why this type of investigative reporting was reserved for niche markets and highly specialized audiences. This thread, however, lasted for approximately two minutes. The students quickly reverted back to unchecked acrimony towards the media-political complex. In the midst of the Kevin Sites discussion, one student remarked: “I think the government holds back a lot of information, because of fear of public reaction.” Another student echoed this idea: “I think our government knows a lot more about Iraq than they tell us. I think the government has a foot in every major corporation out there. Media corporations.”

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<sup>51</sup> See: <http://www.thehotzone.com>

It is interesting to follow the iterations of the discussion threads. The conversations would occasionally engage in substantive analysis, as was the case with the discussion about Kevin Sites. However, these conversations seemed to be small aberrations to the generally cynical tone towards the entire media industry.

While comments on Iraq and the media-political-economic nexus may have much truth to them, the context within which they were stated was more impulsive and rash than thoughtful and reflective. Students did not speak about the complex but necessary relationship between the media and the government but instead, it seemed, fell back on the idea that media were corrupt and only out to make money. Students were not able to sustain critical discussions of media's necessary role in providing diverse and relevant information to the American public. They displayed a confidence in their cynicism—as if media literacy had provided them the critical skills to effectively defend themselves against media's manipulations and misrepresentations. This could simply be a product of youthfulness, or signal a possible unintended consequence of media education's effects on students.

In 1973, Jacques Ellul, in *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* alluded to the idea that the educated were the most vulnerable. Ellul (1973) speculated that those educated in media functions, who believe they are superior to media influence, became subject to media persuasion by not interacting with media in a way that may hold the media industry accountable for its actions.

Ellul's theory lends keen insight into the reaction of the experimental group students to the conversation about politics in media. The students' discussions about politics and media were neither wrong nor inappropriate. They were grounded, reasonable, and somewhat expected. The students did, however, give the impression that they felt superior to "the media." They spoke negatively about how media influences society while at the same time absolving themselves of any responsibility because knowing about it seemed to make them content with their assertions.

Media literacy education should make students feel that they are smart enough to intelligently understand media's influence on society. However, it should respond to Ellul's theory by also providing the fundamental awareness students need to be educated and not vulnerable. Students should be able to connect media functions to their lives and media's necessary role in society. This was absent from the discussions.

The control group discussion approached the role of politics in media in brief, and with less negativity. "You can have smart guides for news media, but there is always going to be the money and the corporations, and you won't be able to separate those things. Politics and religion are always going to be involved, *but we know that, so we have to see it... [emphasis added]*," stated one participant. The student here acknowledged a condition, and responded to its existence constructively. The conversation shifted after this comment, but its weight was felt in the classroom, as many of the participants nodded in agreement. Perhaps the control group did not touch upon the subject of politics because they were not, as Ellul wrote, as educated about media. This idea may hold merit

as a key indicator for the difference in the scope of discussion, and negativity expressed between the experimental and control groups.

The discussions concerning profit and politics were perhaps the most animated. The experimental groups often pinpointed media as the root of their distrust of business and government. They often spoke of media, politics, and business connections that led to lies, deception, and a general duping of the American public. Their negativity was based on a simple disposition to blame the media. This trend was perhaps most predictable in that politics and profits are often at the center of scandal and public dissent in the United States. The control group used existing media functions—profit models, news biases, news gathering techniques, major news networks—to discuss certain trends in information dissemination that were influenced by politics. They were able to discuss why information was manipulated and for what causes. Again, however, their discussions were less substantial and more exploratory.

#### *News vs. entertainment*

As the conversation shifted from business and politics to entertainment in news coverage, the experimental groups' comments again reflected a general negativity towards media. Students spoke primarily about what they correctly perceived to be increasingly blurred lines between news and entertainment. One student from the experimental group spoke specifically about this blurred line with regards to global issues:

I think the coverage is irrelevant and almost pathetic. Things like Darfur get overshadowed by topics like OJ Simpson, Dick Cheney shooting his friends, or Clinton/Lewinsky. I mean, no one knows about Kosovo, but everyone knows who Monica Lewinsky is. That's what the news talks about every hour of every day.

You can't watch an hour of CNN without them covering entertainment news. And people don't care, that's what they want.

News is largely based on proximity. That Monica Lewinsky is covered in light of her relations with the former President of the United States is neither negative nor irrelevant. However, the extent and scope of this coverage is what should be questioned. While this student's comment is an accurate reflection of news practices today, his/her inclusion of "coverage is pathetic and irrelevant...people don't care...and that's what they want" is somewhat reflective of a natural disposition to lay blame somewhere rather than ask critical questions.

The experimental group students also alluded, accurately, to the idea that entertainment stories were used to offset depressing coverage. "I think real news is pretty depressing. Everyone wants to turn towards some type of entertainment just to take their mind off of all this depressing news," said one student in response to the extensive coverage of Britney Spears on major network news outlets. Another student followed this by abruptly stating, "Mainstream news is, like, so harsh and depressing."

Generally, news is often "harsh and depressing." The experimental group students were not wrong in emphasizing this idea. Nor were they wrong in alluding to possible reasons for the growth in entertainment news. What was disconcerting was their lack of critical discussion about why this exists, about the possible reasons for the depressing nature of news, and how such coverage influences the American public—fundamental outcomes of media literacy education. Even when prodded by the moderator as to why news was so

harsh and depressing, and often sensationalized, the students fell back on simple statements and assertions.

Students from the control group were also critical about entertainment in news, but in some instances more understanding as to why this blending occurs. On speaking about entertainment-driven stories in news media, one student remarked: “I don’t think it’s [entertainment] relevant for us to know, but it’s relevant to get our attention, and keep it.” This comment is not very different from the experiment student’s comment about entertainment. However, it signaled acknowledgement of the techniques used by mainstream media to grasp audience attention—part of the critical understanding process. This was a key difference between the experimental and control groups. The experimental groups engaged with the topic by criticizing media’s use of entertainment, and not asking why or pondering this media function. The control group acknowledged the existence of this media function, and discussed why it is used, its influence on the news, and the implication of such blending.

When discussing whether news/entertainment blurring was more positive or negative, the following small exchange ensued in the control group discussion:

*Student1:* I think it’s a common thing.

*Student2:* I think it’s sad that it has to happen, but its smart.

*Student3:* I think it depends on what the other news is... The news comes on, and a liquor store is robbed, and the cops shot someone, and someone fell off the bridge. What is this? How come the only news is about bad things? Is there no happy news? Is there nothing good you can put on TV?

*Student2:* Which is why entertainment news that you can joke about may be a good thing.

*Student3:* I think on the morning news they always throw in the happier stories...like a single mother of ten wins the lottery! Something good to start your day, maybe?

*Student2:* Is that because nothing bad has happened yet today?

Through the questioning of news choices, the students began to offer positive examples of “good” news practices to counter his negative claims. The control group presented ideas, perspectives, and scenarios about the topic. This type of dialogue was less common in the experimental group discussions.

*Is there any relevance?*

Overall, the key differences between the experimental and control group conversations concerned substance. Young minds attempting to understand complex social structures often revert to antagonism before understanding. These discussions, however, were revealing in that the experimental groups transferred critical media engagement into cynical dispositions towards media. In some ways, the students’ criticisms were warranted. The problem was that they were not critiquing media but criticizing media. They rarely engaged in discussions about why media acted as it did, and to what end for audiences and democracy. They were critical, but not reflective.

Alternatively, the control group students, while also negatively predisposed to media coverage, expressed their views in a more discursive nature. Stated one control group participant concerning news relevance: “Sometimes it’s relevant, but most of the time it’s not.” Another student countered this point by believing that “it’s [relevant coverage] out

there, you just have to look for it. The information needs to be shown.” One student from the control group further displayed the type of critical discussions present throughout the session. The student argued for Vice President Cheney’s hunting accident as “relevant,” opining: “he is someone we have elected into a position of power, and have to trust his character to put him in a position of power, so we have to know these sorts of things.”

The difference in tone between the experimental focus groups and the control focus group concerning media’s role in American society became more apparent as the discussions progressed. The experimental group students used pertinent examples to discuss media, but centered their thoughts on notions of corruption, secrecy and conspiracy. Additionally, most experimental group students took a “blame the media” approach. Their criticism was focused on the media industry itself. The only points at which audiences were mentioned in this section of the discussion were to point out that audiences either “don’t care” or “don’t want to know.”

### ***Credibility***

*I personally always try to assume that journalists are going to try and tell us the truth because of their code of ethics, but I also understand that people are people. So they’re going to have biases whether they try as hard as they can to be fair or not.*

-Student, control group-

In all three focus groups, after discussing media’s relevance in delivering information to the public, the conversation shifted to credibility in media coverage. This was approached in as neutral a fashion as possible. The conversation began not through the moderator asking, “How biased is the media industry?” but by probing students about

the depth and credibility of media coverage of news. All three conversations, however, soon migrated to discussions about biases in news reporting.

“I just think everything has a strong bias. I believe that a lot of things we hear today are just what the government wants us to hear. Everyone talks about the propaganda that Hitler used, and I’m not comparing anything to Hitler, but I think this government uses as much if not more propaganda as Hitler,” said an experimental group participant.

Comparing current U.S. media systems to Hitler is not unfounded in terms of political media use and propaganda. Such a comparison could even be used to elicit substantive learning experiences. However, as was the case with the earlier discussions, the student made this comparison the end of his point. He had no larger implications for this comparison. Nor did he attempt to reflect on what it meant for media in present day America. No other students commented on or refuted this claim, even when asked by the moderator to elaborate.

The experimental group conversation surrounding the Hitler comment reflected the evolving negativity of the discussion. “It’s all bias, some networks are more subtle, but I still think it’s all biased. Fox news is less biased...” said one student just before the Hitler comment. Another student disputed the assertion about Fox News: “Bill O’Reilly is ridiculous. Everything he says is completely biased.” These comments began to reveal a trend in the discussions. The students began to negatively criticize media instead of critically discuss why news media functions as it does. Their distrust of media became a defense mechanism. Are students taught critical media skills to understand what Fox

News's "Fair and Balanced" motto is attempting to achieve? Or are they simply taught about the contradiction in terms of their motto and their impending biased points of view?

Students from the experimental discussions seemed content with criticizing Fox.

Discussing the implications of a news program like Fox were absent from the discussion.

Partisan news networks have also significantly contributed to the evolution of so-called "fake" news<sup>52</sup> shows, such as Stephen Colbert's (*The Colbert Report*) and Jon Stewart's (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*) becoming safe havens for younger generations to receive news. Stated an experimental group student:

Stephen Colbert is sarcastic, not biased. And Jon Stewart knows what he's talking about. He's, in my opinion, one of the most intelligent people in television. He has his opinions, it's just that he happens to be a comedian and does it in a funny way. That's how he wants to do it. He doesn't like the Six O'clock news, or watching Katie Couric tell you about Iraq.

These two programs constantly shift between "fake" news/comedy and reporting of news events. The evolution of such shows is partially a result of increasingly partisan news outlets over the last several decades. All the students involved in these focus group discussions are products of this generation. They admitted watching these two programs to find news, albeit in a comical way. No student, however, discounted these outlets as less credible than major news outlets. That they think of these sources as equal to network news in terms of credibility is a reflection of the general climate for younger generations' views towards major network news outlets. These discussions revealed three key insights about the students' negativity towards news media.

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<sup>52</sup> For lack of a better separation, and for oft self-exclamations by both Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, this dissertation will refer to their programs as "fake" news. This is not intended to assert that their news is, in fact, fake, but to facilitate the key differences in student opinions of news credibility. In the same way, "real" news will refer to major news outlets.

First, “fake” news programs have become viable alternatives for those who have little trust in real news networks. An Annenberg study conducted in 2004 reported that *Daily Show* viewers had strong knowledge about the presidential campaign (Young, 2004). One student from the J175 course strongly believed in the credibility of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report*: “I think both shows are credible. Because they draw in a different audience and still get the facts across, and they do it in an entertaining way. So a lot of people watch it and the points get across.” Another student in the experimental group, agreed: “It’s news. Most of the time, they talk about stuff that’s happening, like current events...” Students from the J175 course generally considered “fake” news as more credible than “real” news. Students from the J175 course engaged in arguably their most critical thought and analytic discussion of the entire session while speaking of an *abandonment of viewing and believing network news*. As one student stated, her “trick” is to see all sides:

I look at Jon Stewart like I look at *Hardball* on MSNBC. I think most talk shows, even though they don’t like to admit it, are biased to the right, and Jon Stewart is biased to the left. So I think if you watch both, you will get a pretty good idea of both sides.

This discussion thread reflected an ability to engage in strong critical discussion about media. Students did seem reflective and understanding about the role of such shows in the U.S. media climate for younger audiences.

Second, it is apparent that most students had little faith or trust in news networks, believing that because they are either politically or financially motivated, they do little to

provide relevant and credible information. As mentioned briefly above, this evokes concerns about the general quality of news in America today. Younger generations seem generally less trusting of major news networks. This is either reflective of increased partisanship in network news, the increased availability of alternative news gathering methods, or a general aversion to a news environment focused more on attaining viewers than the content of their stories. Nevertheless, this trend was apparent throughout this discussion.

A third possible reason for the aversion towards major network news is the increasingly indistinguishable division between real news and entertainment news. Networks, to compete for ratings, infuse more glamour and celebrity to attract wider audiences. As a result network news, while still overwhelmingly popular for older generations, takes on a different identity for younger generations born with the Internet and seemingly endless options for information.<sup>53</sup>

The control group students did not mention “fake” news in their discussion about credibility in media reporting. Rather, they chose to focus on ways in which media could be more credible. This difference in conversations could be because of the increased critical exposure to media for students enrolled in a media literacy course, or simply due to the fact that the discussions addressed different topics. However, the end result was quite similar to their earlier conversations. The control group conversation was both less cynical and less substantial.

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<sup>53</sup> As TV news devolves into talk show formats with increasingly politicized individuals, perhaps this point is not negative but natural and somewhat needed.

“Everything is going to have a bias no matter what. I mean we’re never going to go over to Iraq and see what’s happening, so it’s good to have a discussion about these things. To question things,” a control group participant pointed out. Such thought is more indicative of a reflective media consumer than a negative media critic. Another student used Hurricane Katrina to talk about media bias: “With Hurricane Katrina, they only showed the bad things. But there were also good things that happened down there, like all the volunteers, and the work of the Coast Guard.” One control group discussant concluded the discussion with a quote indicative of the overall tone of the discussion:

I understand where it’s all coming from, but with programs like Fox News, I mean that’s a massive conservative news outlet. For every conservative person they put half a liberal. It’s very skewed and I think people need to know that. I’m not saying that’s the only network like this, but its one of many that people need to know about.”

The discussions on credibility in reporting led to interesting possible reasons for what was perceived as more cynical views by the experimental students and more diverse conversations by the control group students. First, the media literacy groups were much more uniform in their thought. This is most likely due to the fact that they were all in the same class and exposed to critical media analysis twice a week.

Second, and perhaps most important, this difference was either a red flag for the way in which students approach critical engagement with media, or an indictment on the control group students for not adequately critically engaging with media. The J175 students may have simply skipped over their need to discuss the numerous sides to coverage of an issue, but rather focused on only the media failures, as that was what they had been

trained to do. They did not need to ask about good versus bad coverage, or discuss the positives that may have come from Katrina coverage, as the control groups did. Overall, these differences led to one overarching query: Are the media literacy students becoming more critical towards media, or simply more cynical?

### ***Students as Media Consumers***

*“Information has the biggest impact on democracy. People will say this is a Christian nation and our morals are built on Christian values. That’s the traditional value, and it’s a very big thing. Other than that, the media is how we grow up. TV is a new thing, from the 60’s on. It’s our generation. More than just who we vote for, more than how we view politics, but about the way we think. Since we were kids, media is how we grow up.”*

-Student, J175: *Media Literacy* course-

Before the sessions shifted to discussing what being informed and aware of media meant, the students were asked how much attention they paid to the news media, and the role they thought it played in their lives.

“I mean, it’s always important to hear about things, but I only care about stuff I want to care about. If it’s important to me, I’m going to care about it,” said a student from the experimental group. Another student offered a confession, albeit justified by his/her personal admission as to why he/she did not choose to vote in 2006: “I mean, this is horrible, but I didn’t vote. I felt I wasn’t informed enough to make a decision...I was informed on some things, but I didn’t have time.” Another student followed this by stating: “It depends on who you are and what your goals are. I follow news all the time...I think you have to go out of your way to be informed.”

Such discussions reflect an ability to critically think about media's role in civic life and what it means to be informed. Stated another student: "In an age when technology has become so vast, you can't really be expected to stay completely informed...I mean, I make an attempt of course, but I don't think anyone can really be informed completely." An interesting dichotomy within the experimental group discussions began to emerge at this point. Students negatively disposed to media just minutes earlier began to speak about attempting to be informed, and of the importance of understanding the numerous sides to a story.

The control group students were somewhat hesitant as to how they felt about their interactions with media. Their discussion ensued with a bit of self-deprecation: "I knew way more in high school than I do in college...I'm in a bubble now," said one participant. "Not at all," echoed another. Another student from the control group offered his take on how informed he feels: "skim the headlines, look at the pictures, and then move on." This was rather indicative of the group's overall opinion on how informed by media they felt. Aside from one student saying, "if something's really interesting to you, you're going to find out more about it. That's how I am," the group chose not to discuss, but instead fell back on the idea that they were not, or were not yet required to be, informed.

The control group students' had little to no formal media education in the past. As a result, they saw themselves as "not yet required to be informed." The students felt as if they were not yet at a stage where democratic participation was necessary. The media literacy students never mentioned this, most likely due to the fact that the curriculum they

engaged with is highly relevant to social and civic issues through political, economic, cultural and other mass media (re)productions.<sup>54</sup>

An additional interesting and perhaps relevant point to note from the control group students' discussion was their overall dissatisfaction with higher education curriculum. In this part of the discussion, the group talked about how they never had the time to discuss such relevant topics like media and news. They blamed this on class organization and structure:

In high school you had much more time for discussion between students and teachers. You may not have heard of something and someone brings it up, and then the whole class is talking about it. Here you go to class, the professor starts the lecture right away, and then you leave right when it's over. And the professor usually leaves before you.

This is revealing in that one element of a media literacy education that distinguishes it from other educational methods is that students' should be at the center of the learning process. The teacher should move from orator to moderator; he or she should be peripheral rather than central. This point should lend some insight to the idea that media literacy, as integrated across the curriculum, has the opportunity to engage students across disciplines. In the present day, it is safe to assume that the media messages are part of most university disciplines. If students started discussing media as part of their curriculum in most classes, they may stand to feel better informed about events that occur in their community and nationally. This comment also alludes to the formal organization

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<sup>54</sup> The use of "(re)productions" derives from Sholle & Denski's use of the term in their 1994 book, *Media Education and the (Re)Production of Culture*. The full citation appears in the references section.

of media literacy courses.<sup>55</sup> If discussion and critical debate are the ways to best enhance media literacy learning experiences, course structures should reflect these aims.

Before discussing student views on media literacy, it is important to keep in mind the following outcomes from the first half of the focus group discussions:

- The experimental group expressed cynicism about media relevance and credibility.
- The control group portrayed a limited understanding of the functions of news media with respect to coverage, neutrality and dissemination.
- The experimental groups, in general, focused more on denouncing media functions than on critical reflection and discussion of why media works as it does and to what end.
- The control group students shied away from discussing their relationship to media and its effect on their views and opinions.

As will become evident in the next section, the views expressed towards media literacy expose a rift in the connection between media literacy skills attainment and critical understanding of media's role in society. The experimental group students, cynical in their personal views about media, could not stop praising the benefits of media literacy and the new knowledge it brought to their daily lives. This exposed an unintentional disconnect perhaps detrimental to the overall goals of media literacy education. It also

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<sup>55</sup> The *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* course used for research here follows a lecture/discussion format. Professor Susan Moeller lectures once a week. A team of four or five teaching assistants conducts discussion sessions once a week, reviewing topics covered by Dr. Moeller's lectures.

may signify growing pains for media literacy in its aim to connect critical skill attainment with critical thought.

### ***Topic Two: Seeing the Media – Being Media Literate***

The last part of the focus group sessions was devoted to discussing media literacy. The intent was to follow up the discussions on media practices with a conversation about media audiences. The shift was intended to advance the discussion towards the idea of formal education about media and its possible influence on the way in which the participants interacted with media. The conversation centered on one main topic:

- What do you think being a media literate person entails? Considering how much time you spend with media—do you think learning about media functions and practices would affect how you interact with media?

After spending approximately 45 minutes discussing news and media, the students were told to begin to think about the term media literacy.<sup>56</sup> They were asked to specifically ponder how education about media could influence or affect their earlier discussions. The experimental groups began to discuss the specific benefits of media literacy education, while the control group began to discuss general beliefs, opinions, and viewpoints about formal media education. This concluding portion of the sessions helped the students reflect on the connections they saw between their knowledge of media and their personal views and opinions.

Again, differences were evident. The experimental groups' adhered to the "textbook" benefits purported by media literacy education. When asked about the possible influences

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<sup>56</sup> The control group was offered a definition of media literacy to assist their thinking.

of education about media, they mentioned looking deeper at messages, feeling more analytical, being better informed, noticing more details, understanding specific media practices, and so on. The tone was one of self-admiration, as if media literacy had aided their defense against the “big bad media monster.” The control group, on the other hand, believed that media could be a positive force for democracy. They expressed some skepticism about the motivations of media, but remained ultimately positive about the role media could play in society.

These differences further exposed the potentially hazardous outcomes of media literacy education that is premised predominately on increasing students’ critical skill levels, but also the potentially beneficial outcomes of media literacy education predicated on teaching for aware citizenship.

### ***Learning about Media***

*Media education raises awareness, and to some extent it takes away ignorance. Because it makes you look at things differently and analyze things more than just soaking everything in. Everyone says the media is just sending information and everyone just accepts it. Media literacy makes you analyze it more.*

- Student, J175: Media Literacy course-

The experimental focus groups were unanimously positive in their discussions about the media literacy course and its effect on their relationship with media. Students spoke of their newfound ability to look deeper at the news, discover the “true” aspects of a story, and locate different perspectives in the retelling of an event. “Before I took this class,” said one student from the experiment group, “I accepted what I saw. Now I realized I have to look deeper to really understand what’s going on. I think the past election is an example of how looking deeper into the speeches and ads makes a big

difference.” “Before I would just watch TV,” said another student, “Now I actually find things I’ve learned in television. The stereotypes especially stick out for me.” Another student followed this by stating, “I’m glad I was able to learn about things, especially about how stereotypes were really reinforced through the mainstream media.”

Students’ positive statements about the benefits of media literacy were a positive sign for the outcomes of the course as they perceived it: “I know a year ago I didn’t pay attention to the news at all. Now, I’m much more into it. It matters a lot more,” said one female in response to a question about the effects of knowing more about media functions. “I feel like I learned to pay attention more to the little parts of information that are used to help you understand things,” echoed another.

The most optimistic quotes of the media literacy discussion were expressed through examples of the media’s coverage of Hurricane Katrina. One student from the experimental group stated: “I find myself trying to find out the story much more than before, like the coverage of the black and white victims of Katrina ... since then I look more closely into things.” Another female followed this by stating, “After seeing the black and white coverage in Katrina’s aftermath, it made me realize that you have to look at things hard, and really question coverage.” One female student noted that her personal activism emerged from understanding events as portrayed through media:

After seeing the Yahoo reports of the different race reporting by the media, I joined the alternative spring break, and we are going to stay in the ninth ward and actually talk to the people. And seeing that coverage made me want to do this. Stuff like this touches me.

Student responses to the influences of media literacy were considerably positive. At the conclusion of the session, both experimental groups even mentioned how sessions like the focus group discussions had furthered their media savvy. Apparently, media literacy had enabled them in some ways. They seemed empowered both to use media to become more aware and informed, but also to use cynicism as an explanation for their personal disappointment with media.

At the session's end, the experimental group discussants sounded as if they were part of an advocacy group for media literacy. There was a genuine air of authenticity to their discussion, and their praise seemed well deserved. This, however, came in stark contradiction to the negative thoughts they expressed earlier in the discussion. Why the sudden change of heart? Did the students realize how negative they sounded in the earlier discussion? Did they understand the difference between criticism and critical reflection?

Students continuously exposed to examples of media influence and persuasion may be affected in the same way that advertisers target their audiences. Young minds are often sensitized and influenced by the ideas expressed in the classroom. In this specific case, students increased their critical skills and knowledge about media practices. How such skills were taught to the students and with what specific content may have significant implications for their negative personal dispositions towards media. While the specific reasons for such negative views are often difficult to isolate, the overwhelming evidence points to a media literacy experience that effectively taught the students skills to critically

view media, but not how such critical viewing should be couched in media's larger civic roles and responsibilities. Students criticized media with little reflection. They did not critique media with the understanding that media were a vital and necessary part of a democratic society. Their critical skills should, according to media literacy, enable such ideas to permeate students' critical media viewing. In this study, their critical viewing became defensive instead of engaging.<sup>57</sup>

In response to questions about media education, the control group took a categorically different approach to the topic. They began to discuss what it means to be informed, and how media can offer a platform for this to occur. The students openly discussed the virtues of opinion-formation and different ways to become a savvy-news consumer. Their conversation centered on what being an informed citizen entailed.

These participants highlighted the main educational outcomes a media literacy curriculum attempts to infuse in students. Said one student: "I don't form my opinions from just what I hear on the news. I get different pictures and sources and stuff... I try to get an informed opinion on issues. I take all views into account, and that's how I get an informed opinion." This line of thought is somewhat naïve and idealistic. It also came from a student who claimed to have no prior formal media education. A comment as such alludes to a key question concerning the difference in the group discussions: were the control group students, not yet sensitized to critical media inquiry shallow and naïve, or were the J175 students sensitized to process media messages in such a negative way that

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<sup>57</sup> A small consolation prize, however, was offered by one student through the following snippet: "And media literacy is interesting. It's not completely boring like most other college lectures."

the statement above would seem rather ignorant to them? Another control group student followed those sentiments with a lengthier comment:

You have to take in all the different views to be informed. You see a bunch of different sources, and put them together to form an opinion. I will listen to exactly what George Bush is saying, and then make an opinion on it...once Joe liberal and Joe conservative start analyzing, I know they have agendas and they are trying to persuade. I can formulate an opinion on what GW is saying because I have basic facts that are un-arguable...I can formulate a real opinion without being swayed by either side.

In both these comments, students talked philosophically and used relevant examples to highlight what it means to be media literate. And they did so in a somewhat positive way, advocating the use of numerous sources to arrive at an informed opinion on an issue or event.

This portion of the discussion was surprising in that the control group students, while not using such direct terminology, expressed arguably savvier views about information attainment and opinion formation than both experimental focus groups. They went beyond simply speaking about looking “deeper” at media, and discussed how education about media can actively influence and inform students. One control group student summed up the discussion by providing a somewhat philosophical conclusion to the session: “Maybe I have a certain opinion on something—the war for example—but its not set in stone because everything is always changing. There is always room for change and flexibility in your views. And the stations you watch will also change, and how you view them will also change...”

A statement as such encapsulates the paradox that emerged in the results of the focus groups. The control group, who scored lower on the media literacy skills assessment test, seemed to express less negative and burdened views of the media. Were these students more enlightened, or rather, is ignorance bliss?

### **Focus Group Wrap-up: Understanding Media's Role in Society**

*"I'm actually a little disheartened. I mean, to think that it's always going to be this way. It's sad."* -Student, J175: Media Literacy course-

The focus group sessions revealed key differences between students who took the media literacy course and those in the control group. Most apparent was the negativity apparent in the experimental group discussions. This was revealing in light of the experimental test results. However, a second outcome was perhaps more alarming in light of the goals of the media literacy education. There was a disconnect apparent in the experimental group discussions.

Between the first 45 minutes and the last 15 minutes of the discussions, it seemed as if the experimental groups consisted of two different sets of students. In a matter of minutes, they transformed from cynically detached aggressors to lauders of the benefits of the media literacy experience. This disconnect has significant implications for the outcomes of a media literacy curriculum.

The control group participants' less dichotomous discussions could be attributed to their lack of formal exposure to critical media studies in general. This, however, is beside the

point. The lack of ability to transfer media literacy skills to a critical understanding of media's role in society is an implication that must be addressed if media literacy is to be a truly effective means of education for active and engaged citizenship.

### *Why So Negative?*

The negativity discovered in the experimental group discussions was cause for concern on numerous fronts. First, the general climate of cynicism was extensive. The general negative tone of the conversation on media relevance and bias overshadowed any substantive discussions about relevance and credibility that may have evolved. As one male student from the experimental group stated:

I think a lot of our generation is cynical. I personally feel like organizations are out to get us. I think everyone needs to question everything. I think when the media tell you something on the news, they aren't trying to give you information, but trying to benefit themselves. It's like what corporations try to do to better themselves.

This thought, just one example of the general tone of the discussion, represents a breakdown in notions of traditional democratic trust and social responsibility. One student echoed the statements above: "...you can't trust anyone or anything. You have to be on your toes. You can't trust anything. You always have to assume there's a catch or someone's out to get something from you." These ideas are only reflective of a few students, but that they were generally accepted in the discussion is a cause for concern.

Another male student from the experimental group went even further by stating, "I don't believe anything I see on television. Even if I watch a bunch of sources, I don't believe it. If A and B are giving the story, I still don't believe it." When prodded to expand on this statement, the student offered no further explanation or reasoning, but simply reasserted

that he did not trust one bit of information he received. In a response that wryly attempted to diffuse this comment, another student uttered: “We aren’t plotting rebellion, but I think we are a generation that is cynical.”

Cynical dispositions are common in many young adults entering university. Questioning the world and its intricacies are natural and appropriate reflexes in all people. However, in this specific case the cynical ideas expressed by the students were in direct response to media and its societal roles. What is the connection between any pre-existing cynicism and the critical media exposure in a media literacy class? Perhaps media literacy as it stands is inadequate to its goal of creating more informed *citizens*.

The control group also expressed negativity, but not to the extent of the experimental group. Their negative remarks were interspersed in larger discussions about audience roles in understanding media, definitions of media, and larger ideologies that media can reinforce. Their occasional lack of critical engagement and substantive discussion was likely due to a lack of formal and critical investigation into media functions. The nature of the control group’s skepticism can be seen in one student’s comment:

I watch news with a cynical eye. I think you have to. Because people watch stuff and buy everything they see, and that’s annoying. I don’t watch news and say, really, and take everything they are saying...you have to be cynical to be realistic.

This student used the word cynicism to describe a sort of healthy skepticism, mentioning that it was his responsibility to be aware of media practices and seek out inconsistencies and discretions of specific messages. This remark was made during a discussion about media credibility with students who claim to have no prior formal media literacy

education. Again, this statement can be seen as rather idealistic and somewhat unrealistic, but rarely were similar sentiments expressed in both experimental focus groups.

Attempting to find reasons for the negativity manifest in the discussions leads to numerous possible explanations. First, such outcomes could be representative of the generation involved in this study. In light of the recent political (WMD scandal, Libby trial) and corporate (Enron, Tyco) corruption exposed in the United States, and building on past national political scandals (Clinton/Lewinsky, Reagan/Iran Contra, Nixon/Watergate), students may be sensitized to react negatively to the media industry, and political coverage in general.

Second, the teaching of the J175 course could have had much to do with the existing negative outlook of the students in the experimental groups. Some students remarked that they were taught to be cynical, as they were only shown the negative ways in which media worked to distort reality and sensationalize fact. This point is well taken and an issue that deserves its own exploration. Media literacy advocates outcomes that reflect understanding and awareness, and not negativity and cynicism. However, the field rarely comments on how such transfer is attained. Rather, media literacy scholars assume teaching students the skills to be critical will lead to healthy engagement with media. Without defining the experiential outcomes of media literacy and working to ensure their transfer, it runs the risk of succeeding in teaching students to be critical without teaching them how to become engaged. Students should be constantly reminded of the larger

reasons for skill attainment—the awareness of media’s role in society and the personal engagement between individuals and media that allow for informed viewing. Reinforcing these connections is important for the success of media literacy in higher education.

Third, these students may not be representative of the study’s population. They were 27 students expressing their views and opinions in a largely unstructured and open atmosphere. Their conversations may have been influenced by group dynamics that emerged in the discussion for a myriad of reasons. This, however, should not diminish the relevance of the general conversational tone. Nor should it take away from the uniformity with which this tone was expressed. That this occurred in both experimental group sessions reflects a general trend and approach to information by the students who took this specific course.

Fourth, the negativity demonstrated by the experimental groups could also be a product of fragmentation. Students now have so many avenues and options for information that they may be less inclined to rely on a few main sources for information. This may cause a natural rejection of the mainstream “corporate” media outlets, whose reputation for credibility has recently been questioned, especially in light of the Internet’s ability to serve as a watchdog over larger media outlets. The connections between students’ increasing reliance on the Internet and the availability of alternative information via the Internet would be grounds for an interesting future exploration into dispositions towards media.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> A follow-up study could explore the relationship between Internet use and young adults’ cynical dispositions to news media.

At the conclusion of one experimental group session, the moderator asked in passing: “In light of your praise for media literacy, how can you guys be so cynical?” Replied one male student from the experimental group: “People in Iraq aren’t concerned about this because they have to worry about putting food on their table everyday. We don’t, so we can afford to be cynical.”<sup>59</sup>

### ***More Skills, More Negativity: Why a Disconnect?***

When asked about the importance of being educated about media, the students from the experimental group began to praise media education, not for its tangible influence on them, but for its ability to make them more *media literate*. They expressed the connection between media literacy and protecting oneself against media manipulation. Why such a disconnect? Are the students to blame? Should they have been taught to make connections between skills and critical understanding? Were they missing the key learning points of media literacy? This result may be due to inadequate foresight present in media literacy education, or rather an unintended consequence of an entity struggling to find its curricular foothold and place in the halls of the university.

When asked about media literacy and its importance to understanding news, the experimental groups’ comments made it seem as if media literacy was a blessing in disguise. They spoke of media literacy as if it had taught them the proper defense

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<sup>59</sup> This was reminding of a scene in Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, when British Journalist Thomas Fowler says to American Alden Pyle, concerning the Americans involving the local Viet Cong Army in the Vietnam War, “You and your people are trying to make a war with the help of people who just aren’t interested. They want enough rice...they don’t want to be shot at. They want one day to be much the same as the other. They don’t want our white skins around telling them what they want. Thought’s a luxury. Do you think the peasant sits and thinks of God and democracy when he gets inside his mud hut at night?” (Greene, 1955, 119-20).

mechanisms needed to protect themselves from the media powers that be. Media literacy had saved them from the media they lambasted just minutes earlier. One student found media literacy to be of little use to him, explicitly stating: “I think media literacy is something you should already know, and I don’t think it has caused any new reactions.”

Media literacy, if not taught within the social and civic contexts that media function to affect American and global societies, may not be attaining its curricular goals. Media literate students must not only understand how to summarize, analyze, and personally identify with a message, they must also understand the connections between media and social ideologies, and be aware of the democratic necessity of a media system. Such connections are key to enabling critical understanding and awareness.

### **Separating the Skeptics from the Cynics**

The outcomes of the focus group sessions reflected an interesting disposition by the experiment group students’ approach to complex issues concerning media. Their conversations were less substantive than accusing, and less reflexive than assuming. This may be a product of group dynamics or conversational trends, but one aspect was evident: those engaged in the media literacy course were quick to deride media at every possible point.

How can cynical learning outcomes be separated from skeptical ones? Media educators may have to create new frameworks for media literacy that can both teach critical media analysis and teach about how critical media analysis can help inform and engage

individuals with the civic and democratic necessity of media. If taught to enable both of these outcomes, media literacy may avoid unintended outcomes of the focus group discussions.

Chapter 6 offers “flexible” frameworks for post-secondary media educators. This framework is predicated on two specific beliefs. First, that media educators are specifically responsible to teach media in a way that allows students to build a critical understanding of media on their own. Students need to understand how media influences their personal views and values about the social and democratic roles of media. Second, media literate students must learn to make informed and educated decisions about media. By using their newfound critical skills, students should be able to make sound media valuations. Media educators have been highly successful at teaching critical media analysis, but perhaps have unknowingly avoided teaching about what critical media analysis really means for students—informed, aware, quizzical, engaged, and active civic participants.

**PART THREE –  
BEYOND CYNICISM: BUILDING CONNECTIONS**

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**CHAPTER 6**

**A WAY FORWARD FOR POST-SECONDARY MEDIA LITERACY  
EDUCATION**

**Connecting Skills and Understanding**

If media literacy outcomes are to be realized in higher education, educational frameworks must emphasize the connections between critical media skills and an understanding of media's essential civic functions. Scholars (Christ, 2006; Kellner & Share, 2005; Hobbs, 2004; Livingstone, 2004; Heins & Cho, 2003; Scharrer, 2003) have written extensively of media literacy's need to prepare students for active and participatory lifestyles through a deep understanding of media's fundamental roles in society. However, outcomes-based investigations into such learning have seldom occurred. This is especially the case in higher education, where no rigorous empirical investigation into media literacy education has taken place prior to this study.

Skill attainment is one-half of the media literacy experience. The broad range of skills taught and learned must be connected to the choices and decisions individuals have to make concerning the larger democratic landscape. Citizens are informed about that landscape by mediated information—and that landscape itself is often shaped by media messages.

The results reported in Chapters 4 and 5 noted that:

1. Students enrolled in the media literacy course increased their ability to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze TV, print, and radio messages.
2. Students enrolled in the media literacy course expressed negative views when discussing the relevance and credibility of media and its role in a democratic society.

These results exposed a general concern about the outcomes of a post-secondary media literacy experience. Media literacy, in higher education, has focused heavily on critical and analytic skills without equally prioritizing media's social, civic, and democratic implications. As evidenced in this study, students were critical but not reflective of what being an informed citizen entails. If the connection between skills and critical awareness is refocused as the primary outcome of media literacy in the university, it stands to reverse the trends apparent in the results of this study.

Addressing the apparent disconnect in media literacy can expose and attempt to refute the notion that everyone and no one “does” media literacy. Such a notion compromises the true benefits of a field directed at the core of democratic participation. Currently, the lack of a concrete and common understanding of media literacy education befits its reputation in the university. Media scholars David Sholle and Stan Denski (1994) believe the media education discipline “remains on the margins of validity in the university...” (p. 103).

There claim remains true almost fifteen years later. The framework below represents an attempt to shift media literacy from the margins of university education to the center.

### **A New Framework for Media Literacy in Higher Education**

The following framework consists of a definition for post-secondary media literacy education, a model supporting the transfer from skill attainment to the media literate citizen, and guidelines for implementing media literacy into the classroom. This framework should be seen as a platform for media educators from which substantive dialogue about media literacy education reform can ensue. These discussions should include curricular reform, implementation strategies and new integrative teaching and learning initiatives.

#### ***The Definition***

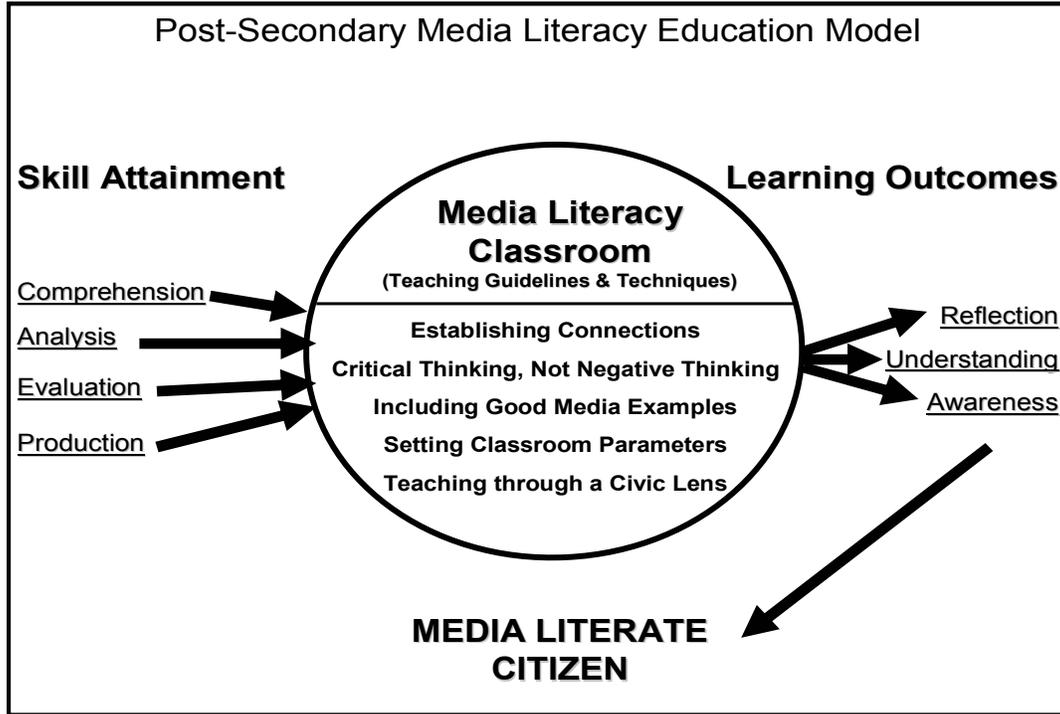
Post-secondary media literacy education aims to prepare students to become:

- *Good Consumers* – by teaching them how to understand, analyze, evaluate, and produce media messages, and;
- *Good Citizens* – by highlighting the role of media in civil society, the importance of being an informed voter, and a responsible, aware, and active participant in local, national, and global communities.

Such an educational experience can help better prepare university students for active and inclusive roles in information societies.

The key to the definition is its emphasis on outcomes. Specifically, the outcomes of a media literacy education should not only be critical skill attainment but also critical understanding that enables informed and aware citizenship. This definition should be seen as a blueprint for new and dynamic media literacy initiatives in college classrooms.

## *The Model*



The post-secondary media literacy education model represents the transfer from skill attainment to critical learning outcomes in the media literacy process. The concepts are not new to media literacy. Rather, they are reorganized to address the specific shortcomings of a post-secondary media literacy experience as evidenced in the findings of this study.

The model begins with critical skill attainment, which is the common goal of all media education. As was reinforced in the experimental results, students exposed to a media literacy curriculum attained the “skills” advocated by media literacy education. The first part of the model assures that skill attainment remains the prerequisite for further learning experiences.

The model next addresses the transfer from skill attainment to qualitative learning outcomes. Media literate students should *understand* the social influences of media, *reflect* on the complex functions of media, and be *aware* of the democratic necessity of a media system. The results of the focus group discussions revealed a void in the relationship between media skills and critical understanding of media's societal and democratic functions. This void was filled largely with brash negativism towards the media industry.

Within the "media literacy classroom circle" are a series of guidelines for post-secondary media literacy educators. Supported by the results of this study, these outcomes-based guidelines provide concrete classroom teaching techniques intended to operationalize the connections between the skills and dispositions of media literacy education. They can also help define the existence of media literacy in the university by offering specific teaching methods that may provide a common framework for the existence of a post-secondary media literacy education.

The end result of a media literacy model for the university is the media literate citizen. A student exposed to the core teaching philosophies of media literacy should be reflective, understanding, aware, and, eventually *literate* of the ways in which media function in society. A shift from assuming skills lead to such outcomes to actually building methodologies to address these outcomes may lead to a more cognizant idea of what students are really learning. These outcomes are the crux of a media literacy education.

Assuming they occur is dangerous. This model is an attempt to assure that these outcomes are met.

### ***Five Guidelines for Post-Secondary Media Educators***

#### ***1. Establishing Connections between Critical Skills and Critical Understanding***

Establishing “connections” requires media educators to emphasize how critical analysis skills translate into more knowledgeable and reflective understandings of media. Students should not be left to make the connection between a media message and its political and ideological implications without having a strong understanding of the relationship between media, democracy, and citizenship. Critical media skills alone will not ensure this relationship is understood. Media educators must be transparent.

In teaching about political election campaigns, for example, media educators should not only show how public relations tactics are used in political image building or attack ads, but also explain why this is done, to what end, and what implications result from such actions. They should also counter every negative example with a positive one. Students should be asked how they personally feel about these media tactics. How do they think the message may influence their opinion on the issue? How can they become more informed through understanding how and why the issue is presented in a certain way? What is the evidence they are using to come to their conclusions? Media educators should also ask about alternative ways to attain information about the topic. How would such information be transmitted without media? What are some alternative ways to inform the public about political candidates?

Students must be taught to realize the necessity of embracing media rather than seeing it as a necessary evil. In the above example, using both positive and negative public relations examples can challenge students' pre-conceived assumptions. Showing how public relations can sway an idea in numerous directions can help students see that media are not only evil and deceptive but also necessary, complex, and occasionally beneficial. Prematurely halting a learning experience may leave students to form opinions on a certain media tactic with no larger idea of its history, use, and role in the social framework of democracy.

If students are made aware of the personal and social implications of a media message or practice, they in turn can become aware of how each message plays a larger role in the makeup of political and cultural ideologies. In this way, “media education enables teachers and students, *exploring together*, to demystify how media are constructed in the manner they are, and for whom they are constructed” (Rother, 2004, p. 107). Post-secondary media literacy educators should always ask their students: What does this media function mean to you? To society? To democracy? To your specific role as a student? An individual? A citizen?

## ***2. Critical Thinking, not Negative Thinking***

Critical thinking should be the general outcome of all media studies. It is often advanced as the final outcome of a media literacy education (Leistyna & Alper, 2007; Kellner & Share, 2007; Feuerstein, 1999; Masterman, 1985). However, few in the field have discussed how critical thinking should be conceptualized as a learning outcome.

Media literacy must make sure critical thinking is accompanied by an awareness of the essential necessity of media for engaged citizenship.

Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share (2005), in particular, developed an outline for what they call “critical media literacy.”<sup>60</sup> Their concepts deal with developing a set of critical *skills* in students that approach ideas of democracy. Rozana Carducci and Robert Rhoads (2005) advocate the term *critical citizenship*, stating: “cultivation of this type of literacy is particularly important in relation to the development of principles, skills, and practices of *critical citizenship*—a form of citizenship that empowers each individual’s identity and advances democracy and the pursuit of social justice” (p. 3).

In 2006 Erica Scharrer, Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, conducted a study on sixth-grade students’ “critical attitudes towards media violence.” Scharrer (2006) posited that students would attain critical thinking abilities, as defined by Ediger,<sup>61</sup> through: “demonstrating the ability to analyze the degree of social responsibility in media as they express their attitudes regarding how television should show violence and about media regulation” (p. 71). Scharrer’s results

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<sup>60</sup> Kellner and Share’s (2005) five core concepts for critical media literacy are:

1. Principle of non-Transparency: All media messages are constructed.
2. Codes and Conventions: Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Audience Decoding: Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Content and Message: Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Motivation: Media are organized to gain profit and/or power (p. 374-377).

Kellner and Share use the media literacy literature to argue for a teaching framework that utilizes critical thinking skills. This approach is aimed at training students to become critical individuals, placing the power not in the hands of the information distributors but in the hands of the receivers.

<sup>61</sup> Taken from Scharrer’s (2006, p. 70) article, Ediger (2001) defined critical thinking skills as producing an individual, “who certainly wants to know if the content is true, accurate, presented responsibly, adequately researched, and honest in intent” (p. 124).

suggested that after a media literacy education, students were more critically inclined to ask the “right” questions about why violence is shown on the television. Her exploration is very helpful, and should be reinforced by the field when attempting to highlight critical thinking as an outcome of media literacy.

Still, precaution must be taken concerning how critical skills are operationalized. As evidenced in the results of this dissertation, those who attained media literacy skills and voiced their appreciation for the benefits that media literacy afforded them, were the same students who negatively criticized rather than critically engaged with media practices.

*A critical thinking, not negative thinking* strategy can approach course content and substance to teach about informed decision-making. Students must be taught to understand how media messages are constructed, the techniques used to influence target audiences, and, perhaps most importantly, the social, civic, and democratic implications of such messages. They must also understand the how such media practices affect people on a personal level.

The possible fallout of critical thinking, as exemplified by the experimental focus group discussions, is that students will not fully connect increased critical thinking with rational media analysis. At this point critical thought becomes negative thought. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that after being sensitized to media functions, the

students were left with an idea that media were a problematic industry. To be media literate, they acted as if they had to see through the media's deceptive tactics.

Such an outcome may be avoided if the notion of critical analysis is bred in a way that advocates both critical and supportive approaches to viewing media. Students should be continuously reminded of media's central, prescient, and necessary role in society. They must struggle to identify with media. They must be aware of the fact that they are completely dependent on media to know about any social, political, economic, cultural, or general event that they do not witness with their own two eyes. If students are sensitized to the idea that they must support media to support continued progressive democratic existence, they can be empowered to do just this.

### ***3. Including Good Media***

In an attempt to protect students from the media's deceptive aims, educators may be prone to focus predominantly on the 'wrongs' of media. This exacerbates the negativity that surrounds the media industry, leading students to expect to have to defend themselves against "deceitful" media tactics. Such continuous exposure to negative media practices can both produce and reinforce cynical dispositions towards media.

Including 'good media' examples in the classroom can be beneficial in two distinct ways. First, using good media examples to counterbalance negative examples can help students to stop "blaming the media." If only sensitized to negative media images and messages, students may be more prone to blame media for societal shortcomings. David Buckingham believes that blaming media allows people to avoid the complexities and

genuine difficulty of confronting and dealing with real social problems. Many media educators, in Buckingham's (2005) opinion:

...tend to be driven by concerns of 'bad behaviors' – sex, drugs, violence, etc. – that they commonly trace back to the influence of the media. Because media educators are well-versed in media functions, they disseminate such pre-conceived opinions to their students. They then think, "if we expose the false ideas, then somehow they'll realize that they have been misled, and they'll stop doing all these things that we don't like (p. 18).

A main under-lying predisposition apparent in the experimental groups' conversations was that media were the root of many social and political problems, and that media literacy had taught them to tactfully outsmart media. This, in turn, made them media literate. This mentality places media as the main culprit for complex social issues.

As noted in Chapter 2, a distinct difference exists between teaching to *protect* students from media and teaching to *engage* students with media. Educators acting as media police will not allow students' to make their own decisions and understand the complexity of issues as portrayed through media. Allowing students to deconstruct arguments, locate numerous points of view, and develop a working awareness of how media messages influence individuals, communities and societies, can lead to a more media "literate" public. This includes using both positive and negative media examples. Students must be shown the diverse ways media work to influence and shape ideas to fully appreciate media's complex existence and vital role in democracy.

Second, good media examples should not only come out of the corporate media industry. Using independent and alternative media sources can expose students to how different

types of media address different social complexities. Students can be exposed to the various ways new media enrich the field of journalism through utilizing case studies where, for example, independent reporters covered a story with rigor and accuracy, bloggers helped un-cover political scandal, or student-expression web sites spur political action. Media educators should no longer only critique the large monoliths of the field to prove their points. Alternative media outlets need to be included in the discussion.

Using good media examples is perhaps a redundant strategy. Teachers who claim that they already use good media in their classrooms often rightly do so. However, using good media examples to offset negative examples, or using them sparingly is not sufficient for media literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Entire lessons should be dedicated to highlighting examples of strong and positive media coverage. Devoting entire classes to the Dove “real woman” ad campaign, or the role media played in Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* can shift pre-existing negative dispositions of media to empowered and reflective engagements with media. Media are predominantly taught through highly critical notions—frames, objectivity, and other complex factors. Many of the dispositions within which media education is positioned are difficult to teach in a positive light—but not impossible. University students can benefit greatly from engaging with the positive examples of media.

New media has re-defined the playing field for journalism and mass media. They are diversifying, increasingly introspective, and often self-critical. Alternative media and new media have opened many new gateways and opportunities for media reform, diversity,

and voice.<sup>62</sup> Using “good” media can help enrich the overall scope of a media literacy experience, while at the same time address media’s social complexities in a more comprehensive manner.

#### ***4. Setting Parameters for the Classroom***

A lack of common post-secondary media literacy understanding has led to the common observance that everyone who teaches media teaches media literacy. And to some extent it is true. Media educators all teach students about media with the intent to teach some new knowledge about media functions and to help students think critically about media. While this is pertinent for higher education, it somewhat compromises the specific learning outcomes that make media literacy unique. As indicated in Chapter 1, the overwhelming evidence to date shows that media literacy’s existence in higher education has suffered from few concrete platforms or frameworks that enable its existence for the university. Establishing parameters for the classroom can highlight what sets media literacy apart from media studies in general: its focus on a skill set and the specific *transfer* of that skill set to an awareness of media’s role in a democratic society.

Setting parameters for the classroom can reduce the complexities that emerge when trying to define media literacy for higher education. Parameters also represent a starting point for substantive discussions about media literacy’s specific *roles* within higher education. Post-secondary media literacy parameters should be premised on two distinct educational attributes of media literacy:

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<sup>62</sup> In his opening speech for the 2006 Citizen Media Summit, Maryland’s Philip Merrill College of Journalism Dean Thomas Kunkel noted that the Internet and new media were largely “reinventing journalism as we know it.”

1. A focus on skill attainment. Specifically, media comprehension, evaluation, analysis, and production.<sup>63</sup>
2. An overall attention to media's roles and responsibilities in society and the civic implications of understanding media's democratic practices.

Focusing on these specific attributes can help enable a distinct understanding of post-secondary media literacy outcomes. This can also help show how media literacy enhances general media studies through its teaching and learning strategies. Such parameters are also meant to be flexibly adopted, as media literacy is an initiative with little structure beyond the common principles it presupposes to teach. Media literacy's adoption into the university should be contingent not on following a set of rules but in assuring that a set of outcomes are reached.

Furthermore, parameters are meant to prevent the misunderstandings evident in past attempts to locate post-secondary media literacy from re-occurring—specifically a lack of any concrete understanding, beyond personal ideas, as to what media literacy is and how it can exist in the university. The parameters allow for a more structured approach to post-secondary media literacy while at the same time contributing to a unique and unified framework for media literacy in higher education.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> On the post-secondary education level, production is a skill highly specified for certain courses, degree tracks, and concentrations. Thus, while it is acknowledged here, it is less holistic than the other three skills, and left to the devices of specific programs and curricula.

<sup>64</sup> Flexible classroom parameter should also aid in the sustained assessment and evaluation of the effectiveness of post-secondary media literacy education.

## ***5. Teaching through a Civic Lens***

The university is the final stop for most in the formal educational process. Scholars (Newman et al., 2004; Dunderstadt & Womack, 2003; Kirp, 2003; Barber, 2002; Ehrlich, 2000a; Ehrlich, 1999; Kerr, 2000; Levine, 1996) have written extensively about the role that higher education plays in preparing individuals for lives of civic responsibility. The aims of media literacy education are relevant to the social component of institutes of higher education and their obligations to the future of American democracy. Civic education scholar Thomas Ehrlich (2000) highlights this duty:

Institutions of higher education should help students to recognize themselves as members of a larger social fabric, to consider social problems to be at least partly their own, to see the civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate (p. 3).

If this were rewritten to include media in its duties and obligations to American democracy, it would read as a manifesto for media literacy, specifically on the post-secondary level.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, news media, “more than any other cultural form, carries the burden of defining the world in which citizens operate” (Lewis 2006, p. 305). The media not only report on issues of civic and democratic relevance, but effectively define and redefine national agendas and ideologies. Media producers make choices on a daily basis as to how issues should be portrayed to the public. These choices often define civic issues and their pertinence in society. A civic approach to media literacy, as introduced in Chapter 2, offers a way to sensitize students to media’s complex but necessary existence for democracy.

In this study, the experimental group participants were quick to fault media for the social and civic ills of the United States. The students, however, made no mention of media's importance to democratic and civic processes. They never discussed alternative media platforms, or media reform. When prodded to think about ways they could see media in a positive light, the students responded with reasons why they could not. How would students' picture life if the government openly controlled the media? Or what if news media companies did not exist? What would the alternatives look like? How would students know about events and occurrences? Pondering such questions, via a civic lens, can help bridge the gap between critical media analysis and civic issues that were largely absent from the focus group discussions.

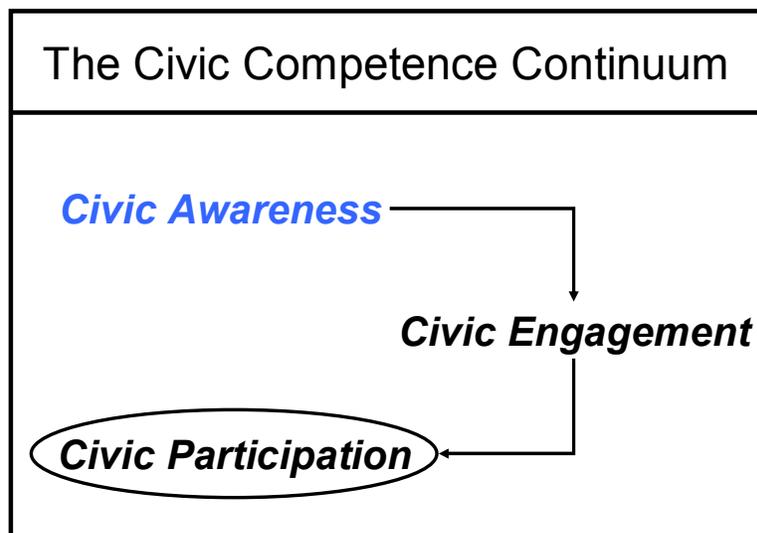
The ideal outcome of incorporating a civic lens in post-secondary media literacy is the development of "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities" (Service Learning). Post-secondary media educators can infuse a civic lens into their curricula by introducing and sustaining mention of the connections between media and civic democracy.

Civic connections can also be emphasized by asking civically-oriented questions. How does the reporting of this issue affect our political process? What does this coverage mean about violence and crime on or near our campus? How can this information help community members understand why they have to pay taxes for better social services?

Such questions can help students realize the connections between what they are learning and its civic relevance.

Table 6 shows a continuum that reflects the civic progression of a university student. The continuum advocates awareness as the entry point of post-secondary media literacy education. Students, at an undergraduate level, are expected to begin active engagement and participation in civic issues. To be better informed of how the issues that influence them and their democracy, media literacy can use a civic lens to help the students become aware of what the issues are, how they are portrayed, and what influence media has on their effectiveness.

Table 6<sup>65</sup>



<sup>65</sup> In this continuum, *awareness* refers to an understanding of how issues are shaped through media, *engagement* is the active pursuit to know about the issues and public information’s varying portraits of these issues, and *participation* is the action that an individual takes—voting, volunteering—in response to issues.

Civic awareness can be conceived as the active understanding of how local, national and global issues are represented through public information. Being civically aware entails understanding the political, economic, social and cultural implications of such issues, with an aim to enact engagement and participation in democratic discourse.

A civic lens through which post-secondary media literacy can be taught stands to strengthen the relationship between the quantitative (comprehension, evaluation, analysis) and qualitative (awareness, reflection, understanding) learning outcomes in the university.

### **A Framework Developed**

The definition, model, and five guidelines for post-secondary media literacy education can provide direction for media educators interested in adopting media literacy elements into their curricula. The end result of the media education experience, as Buckingham (2003) points out, is the *media literate* individual (p.1). Paying less than close attention to the critical connections students make with media may perpetuate the negativity expressed in Chapter 5. If students are not aware of the overarching role of media in their lives and their democratic existences, they run risk of continuing to ignore the democratic necessity of critical engagement.

## CHAPTER 7

### MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION FOR ENGAGED CITIZENSHIP

#### **What are Students Really Learning?**

The results of this study evoke numerous implications for the future of media literacy education in the university. What should a media literate student look like? What are the barriers to entry for post-secondary media literacy education? How can media literacy be successfully implemented into a curriculum? This study is a starting point for dialogue that addresses these issues.

This study also asks a more general educational inquiry: what are students taking away from the classroom? Media educators spend countless hours engaging students with various broadcast, print, and online media in order to initiate critical discussion and analysis. Less frequently do media educators stop and ponder how students civically engage with media based on such learning experiences. How do they think about community? How do they understand media's responsibilities in a democracy? Do they see local, national, and global leaders in a new light? Do they question political choices concerning controversial subjects, i.e., abortion, health care, immigration? Do they understand what voting for a certain initiative means in light of how media outlets portray the issue?

The crux of post-secondary media literacy education is not only that students can perform well on an exam about media or write a strong critique of a media message, but that they gain the ability to transfer their classroom performance into critical thought about the role of information in society and its implications for them as participants in civil society. Overseeing this transfer has never been a prerequisite for teaching or learning about media.

This study has revealed some of the potential shortcomings associated with not teaching for the transfer of critical skills to critical reflection and civic awareness. The experimental inquiry found that the students enrolled in the media literacy course (n=170) increased their ability to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze media messages in print, video, and audio formats as compared to the control group (n=69). This result was anticipated. The focus groups, however, revealed cause for concern.

Students enrolled in the J175 course did not associate skills with a critical understanding of media's social and democratic functions. Rather, their newfound skills transferred into cynical and defensive discourse. The students seemed to feel that their exposure to a media literacy curriculum enabled them to confidently and critically defend themselves against “the media.”

This translated into often reactionary and negative comments towards media—results that distinguish the *informed skeptic* from the *informed cynic*.

The difference between the *informed skeptic* and the *informed cynic* is at the core of media literacy education. Media literacy should breed *informed skeptics*—media consumers critical but understanding of how and why media works as it does, and aware of media’s social, civic, and democratic responsibilities. *Informed skeptics* question media intentions. They seek information for issues most pertinent to their lives and their democratic existences. They question with the aim to be further enlightened, empowered, critical, and supportive of the media—in a way that helps spur reform, accountability, and an overall better media industry.

The results of this study, however, revealed that the media literacy students reflected *informed cynics*—critical but unable to connect critical media viewing with the necessary understanding of media’s central role in society. *Informed cynics* are sensitized to the media’s negative traits, and thus take assumingly pessimistic stances towards media. They become reactionary, defensive and blame-centered. This is neither a productive nor intended outcome of media literacy in the university.

In their new publication, *UnSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation*, Brooks Jackson and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2007) caution their readers to “be skeptical, but not cynical.”

The skeptic demands evidence, and rightly so. The cynic assumes that what he or she is being told is false. Throughout this book we’ve been urging you to be skeptical of factual claims, to demand and weigh the evidence and to keep your mind open. But too many people mistake cynicism for skepticism. Cynicism is a form of gullibility—the cynic rejects facts without evidence, just as the naïve person accepts facts without evidence. And deception born of cynicism can be just as costly or potentially as dangerous to health and well-being as any other form of deception. (p. 175).

This divide represents the gulf in the learning outcomes of a media literacy course. If there is no association between critical skills and critical awareness of media's civic and social responsibilities, then what real learning experiences have occurred?

Fortunately, this is not a problem inherent in media literacy, but perhaps born from a lack of direction. The findings above seem to reflect an educational entity that is still growing and attempting to find its place in the university. These outcomes are not inherently tied to the structural foundations of media literacy itself. Offering platforms, frameworks, and curricular avenues for discussions going forward can help the unintended consequences of a post-secondary media literacy curriculum be acknowledged and reformed.

These frameworks and platforms can be utilized to approach some of the key issues that emerged from this study:

- *Empowerment vs. Inoculation* – Students should be empowered through media to live more informed, active, and full lives.
- *Skepticism vs. Cynicism* – Healthy skepticism involves learning to ask the right questions, to be wary of information, and to appreciate the abundance of information offered in democratic society.
- *Awareness vs. Impulsiveness* – Awareness involves understanding the ways media work to influence opinions, issues, and events. This entails understanding both how media works from a production standpoint but also media's necessary roles and responsibilities for democratic society.

- *Responsibility vs. Carelessness* – Responsibility refers to the ability to understand that it is a civic duty to attain information and use media to make progressive contributions to society.

### **Curricular Reform for Post-Secondary Media Literacy Education**

In addition to the proposed post-secondary media literacy framework suggested in Chapter 6, curricular responses should be developed to address the current concerns evidenced in this study. Curricular reform for post-secondary media literacy should not exist in the form of specific day-by-day syllabi, dictating what to teach, but rather institutionalized in the components of the field itself.

How should new curricular initiatives be reconceived? This question will be perhaps best answered in subsequent explorations into the existence and effectiveness of current media literacy initiatives in the university.<sup>66</sup> However, certain fundamental reforms can be made to avoid the unintentional learning outcomes evidenced here.

New curricular efforts must remain strong in teaching skills, but also adopt teaching strategies and utilize content to highlight media's necessary existence. Entire curricula for post-secondary media literacy should be reorganized to reflect the central role of media in civil society. This must occur for media literacy to fulfill its duty in the university—to prepare critical, aware, and informed civic participants.

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<sup>66</sup> This research will be expanded to test the success of various curricular initiatives developed in light of this specific dissertation.

Political science courses would be remiss if the only ways in which they taught about government were through scandal and deceit, i.e., Watergate, Iran-Contra, WMDs. To be effective, political science courses also teach about the Civil Rights Act, the New Deal, Medicare/Medicaid, and so on. Likewise, media literacy would fail to enable its intended learning outcomes if it only taught about the ways media is used to deceive and manipulate its audiences, i.e., propaganda, political attack ads, altered body images and false advertising. Built within a media literacy curriculum should also be examples where the media succeeded in providing relevant, in-depth, and overall “good” coverage. This can stem from coverage of 9/11, to the Benetton human rights ad campaign, and the use of the Internet and new media to hold public officials accountable. Such curricular reform should be a pre-requisite for any new curricular offerings.

Further, curricula should make the ties between media, society, and democracy explicit—whether through dividing a media literacy course into two-halves or devoting a portion of each class session to exploring the civic connections of the media content used in class. Economics courses will fail if they teach about supply and demand without applying these theories to real world scenarios. Likewise, media literacy must make explicit the connections between the theories it teaches and how they exist outside of the classroom. This means not only exposing students to the negative consequences of deceitful media tactics, but also exposing students to how media can lead to activism, awareness, tolerance, and unity.

Ideally, reforming media literacy curricula to become civically- and democratically-oriented should result in students asking about media practices—not in a way that will leave them wondering why such media practices occur, but in a way that leaves them pondering how such information influences individuals, cultures, and the world.

### **Future Directions for Post-Secondary Media Literacy Education**

Media literacy is not restricted only to those teachers well versed in the field, but applicable to all educators who bring media into their classrooms. The future direction and quality of media literacy do not entail creating courses per se, but in creating accessible and interesting media literacy frameworks for post-secondary education.

Larger discussions concerning media literacy's implementation and adoption should begin at their end point: the outcomes of a media literacy learning experience. What are students going to take away from this course? How will they connect critical media analysis to their values and beliefs about media's role in politics and community? What insights will students gain from interacting with the specific media messages they analyze in a classroom? The specific learning experiences of media literacy education are, of course, contingent upon a myriad of factors, including the curriculum, the teacher, and the students. Nevertheless, asking questions is a starting point for reform.

What direction should post-secondary media literacy education follow in the academy? What discussions should it initiate? Who should be listening? How will the barriers to

entry be overcome? The following suggestions offer possible avenues for a post-secondary media literacy education framework ready to enter into curricular dialogue.

### ***Suggestions for Higher Education***

- The outcomes of media literacy education should become a regular topic of discussion for media educators. Too often outcomes are lost in struggles to build curricular guides and learning tools that help engage students. Post-secondary media educators must focus on the larger implications of their classroom teaching and/or research. This may entail a shift in evaluating outcomes from measuring students' ability to understand a message to measuring their ability to connect that message to its civic and democratic significance.
- Scholars have often pointed to the fact that most media literacy work targets K-12 education (Hobbs, 1998; Galician, 2004). Media scholars need to initiate discussions specifically concerning media literacy in higher education, not only as a teaching initiative but also as an outcome-based learning initiative. This can serve two fundamental purposes. First, post-secondary media educators can begin to conceptualize not only what "media literacy" specifically means but how it can enable their teaching techniques. Second, a discussion about the existence of media literacy in the university will help reverse the trend of post-secondary media educators claiming to teach media literacy but not being able to define it as a learning initiative (Christ, 2004).

- Platforms, or frameworks, for post-secondary media education should be conceived, erected, implemented, discussed, and critiqued. Scholars in the field would benefit greatly from an action plan consisting of guidelines and a mission statement specifically tailored for post-secondary media literacy. A lack of parameters for media literacy's existence in higher education can cause confusion, and lead to vague conceptualizations of media literacy teaching and learning, as shown in Part One of this study.
- A national investigation should be conducted, aimed at locating what programs<sup>67</sup> are actively involved in media literacy education and scholarship. These institutions should distinguish themselves as the flagship locations for media literacy. They can therefore be both examples and outlets for the field. If media literacy is to become a structured and legitimate entity, it must have both demographic and curricular foundations from which interested parties can attain tangible and credible information. They can also use these institutions for curricular support and resources. Further, these flagship institutions should make clear the educational level they target with their media literacy teaching and research. This will help avoid confusion when attempting to apply the same media literacy parameters to a first-grade course and an upper-level university course.
- Mass communication, media, and/or journalism programs can help spread awareness of post-secondary media literacy frameworks through workshops,

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<sup>67</sup> Programs in this sense should refer to departments or colleges that have active media literacy scholars, initiatives, and scholarship. Such existences can exist either on the curricular level or on the research level.

seminars, and other service-oriented activities. Revealing potentially hazardous outcomes of media education—cynicism in particular—may help media educators review their teaching methods, specifically in lieu of a media literacy approach to media studies. In this same light, media educators must be shown that this is not an initiative that will interfere with their research agendas or existing course layout and/or teaching load.

- Doctoral students in communication, media, journalism, and beyond, should attend workshops on teaching in higher education. Doctoral students are often new to teaching upon re-entering the university. They should be sensitized to the teaching and learning strategies and philosophies of their subject. Media literacy philosophies could be part of such workshops, specifically considering the media-centric youth they will be teaching.
- Teacher-training courses, beyond the scope of this exploration, should advocate building media literacy lessons into new curricula. This topic has received much attention in the media literacy literature, as it pertains largely to K-12 teachers and is housed in education departments.

One way to remedy the concerns evidenced in the results of this study is to make media literacy part of the media studies landscape. The suggestions listed above are part of an

attempt to create an approach to media literacy that gives the individual skills to understand media critically and knowledgeably (Burton, 2005).

### **Future Considerations for Educational Policy & University Administrators**

Parallel to implementing frameworks and curricular initiatives to help situate media literacy in the university, administrators should begin to think of effective ways to monitor existing and new media literacy initiatives in their programs. This, of course, is contingent on actual initiatives existing in the university. Nevertheless, such initiatives can never begin too early, and are as important to successful and sustainable media literacy initiatives as those born in the classroom.

These considerations should approach media literacy's inclusion in higher education from an administrative standpoint, specifically implementing rigorous assessment and evaluation of post-secondary media literacy education.

### ***Assessment and Evaluation***

#### ***Assessing Learning Outcomes***

In 2006, William Christ edited *Assessing Media Education: A Resource Handbook for Educators and Administrators*. This book offers an ambitious attempt to build assessment frameworks for media educators and administrators in the university. In the preface, Christ (2006) alludes to a key implication for this dissertation: re-thinking how teachers teach and what knowledge students take away from the classroom. He writes:

We are living in the age of accountability. Though calls for accountability and assessment have come and gone, the current demands for proving that students

are learning seem more insistent as they become codified in educational policies. The move from asking teachers what they teach to requiring programs to show that students are learning is a paradigm shift that costs blood, sweat, and tears. It requires educators to look differently at their curricula, courses, syllabi, and measurement mechanisms (p. xi).

The university's shift from a top-down, teacher-driven education style to a bottom-up, student-centered academy of learning has led to increased calls for assessment. How did this accountability evolve? Christ's first fundamental reason for needing more outcome-based assessment is predicated on an external evolution: "states, regional accrediting agencies, local administrators, professional accrediting groups, parents, and students have called for or mandated assessment" (Christ, 2006, p. 10). In an age of increased investment into the outcomes of education, this call for assessment is perhaps natural. However, based on the results of this study, assessment must continue to expand.

Christ's second fundamental reason for assessment is internal. "Assessment," he writes, "has the potential to make teachers, programs, and ultimately, students, better" (Christ, 2006, p. 10). Improving a course, program, department, or college is the overarching aim of any educational reform or assessment. An on-going goal of all media departments should be strengthening their students and faculty. This second reason for assessment is also rather evident.

One fundamental difficulty with measuring learning and teaching to make education better is that such experiences are difficult to quantify. Qualitative educational assessment is often prone to cold shoulders and skepticism from administrators and policy officials often looking for empirical evidence of educational effectiveness. Having

the ability to refer to a set of statistics and empirically-backed findings makes it easier for policy to fall back on numbers for hard evidence of change. This has been a hindrance for assessing educational quality for quite some time. Nevertheless, meticulous inquiries into student outcomes, using both empirical and experiential methods, can help broach the notion of student learning outcomes in the university.

This study recommends rigorous assessment standards for media literacy education.

*Assessing Media Education* provides numerous models and case studies of assessment that can assist educators and administrators in building assessment guidelines for media education. Expanding efforts into assessing the outcomes of media education can not only help improve the overall quality of a program, but also the holistic learning experiences of its students.

### ***Measuring Effectiveness***

Post-secondary media literacy has suffered from a substantial lack of empirical data concerning its educational effectiveness. No empirically rigorous media literacy evaluation mechanism for higher education has been developed to date. This has resulted in a lack of any credible data for the overall quality of post-secondary media literacy education.

Such a shortcoming is not surprising for numerous reasons. First, media literacy education has predominately targeted K-12 education. Second, media literacy has never before been a priority or pre-requisite for the university. Third, existing studies have often attempted to find out what students learn in a media course, or what effects (or lack

thereof) media messages have on students. However, this research has been confined to traditional media effects or education theory frameworks. Fourth, the university has often been left to its own devices regarding curricular initiatives. Media literacy, as a term, has been adapted and applied to so many different types of media education that its foundations have been bent, broken, and occasionally abused in higher education.

One way to advance media literacy in higher education is to increase empirical evaluation of media literacy outcomes in university classrooms.<sup>68</sup> This can serve two main purposes. First, more empirical evaluation will allow for a mapping of the media literacy field of study. Rigorous inquiries into skill attainment and learning outcomes can spur the development of parameters based on statistical data. New frameworks and guidelines based on quantitative findings can serve as discussion points for substantive conversations about the location and scope of media literacy in higher education.

Creating flexible parameters based on evidence and past exploration will allow those departments and schools interested in media literacy to find cohesive guidelines for its inclusion, thus avoiding further perpetuation of the “everyone does media literacy” trend. These parameters should be defined but flexible to allow for adoption in different curricular programs.

Second, rigorous evaluation of media literacy outcomes in the university may help media programs reflect the diversity of the American university. Media literacy is a topic

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<sup>68</sup> This evaluation should be contingent upon media literacy courses falling under the parameters set by this dissertation, or similar frameworks going forward.

devoted to discussing the role of information in society. It thus premises its learning outcomes on reflecting the cultural and ideological productions of the media. These are inherently tied to the racial, ethnic, gender and social depictions of media in an age of diversity and cultural integration. In 1996, Lawrence W. Levine wrote about the role of the university in a larger multi-cultural, diverse, and heterogeneous society. In his book, *The Opening of the American Mind*, Levine challenged those who believe that radicalism and diverse student voices have eroded the core functions of the university. Wrote Levine (1996):

But the American university no longer is and never again will be homogenous, and much of what we have seen recently in terms of speech codes and the like are a stumbling attempt to adapt to this new heterogeneity. The major consequence of the new heterogeneity on campuses, however, has not been repression but the very opposite—a flowering of ideas and scholarly innovation unmatched in our history (p. 28).

Higher education that does not speak to heterogeneous platforms fails in its duty to prepare future democratic participants. Media literacy addresses such sensitivities both through its educational philosophy and critical disposition. Levine's ideas are far beyond the scope of one particular discipline. However, media literacy addresses Levine's idea of the modern day higher education institute—one full of diverse, critical, and heterogeneous thought.

Administrators made aware of the potential benefits of this type of education through evidenced effectiveness, may be more positively disposed to its implementation.

### *Barriers to Entry*

This study is the introduction to a larger investigation. Its barriers to entry are both practical and philosophical. How can transfer be measured? What does it mean to evaluate learning about media? How is a properly educated student supposed to act and think? This specific exploration concerns only one course, one curriculum, and a small number of instructors. Each teaching assistant brought a certain set of ideas, philosophies and approaches to his or her discussion section. This study is not indicative of any or all media literacy existences across the higher education system beyond what is under study here. However, inquiries like this have not been conducted in the past. So while the outcomes here may be limiting in some ways, they should prove valuable for the insights they provide.

The results of this study could have been influenced by other factors than simply the J175 curriculum. On a practical level, the experimental data analysis was kept to a fairly simple comparison of means. The analysis could have utilized regression models and compared specific variables from the pre-test survey to add another layer of statistical analysis. The focus group sessions could have been longer than sixty-minutes, with more than three total sessions for this study. There could have been sessions conducted where students were mixed between experimental and control groups, and the slant of the discussion could have been more civically-oriented.

Concerning the participant base, the students in this study were not limited to learning about media and interacting with media in the J175 class alone. It is safe to assume that discussion about media arise in other courses. They also interact with media outside of school in many different capacities. This study could have been conducted and conceived in numerous ways. However, the results of this study are reported with a high level of confidence, considering the time and effort taken to ensure sound design, implementation, data gathering, and data analysis. All studies have certain limitations based on choice. While this research project was constrained by certain omissions, the overall findings remain grounded in a solid research platform.

On a theoretical level, this study was limited most by its use of terminology. “Media, media literacy, citizenship, awareness, etc.,” are all terms with various understandings, uses, and interpretations. The definitions offered in this study’s introduction were intended to help orient these terms for their use in this study. Such terms can never be constricted, and thus are by default limitations of the study.

Further, certain assumptions in this study had to be made to offer any concrete foundations for the proposed outcomes of post-secondary media literacy education. One specific assumption was that engaged citizenship and civic participation are the intended learning goals for university-level media literacy education. These outcomes can only be assumed because they have yet to be empirically tested as outcomes of a media literacy course. Aware citizenship, as an outcome, was developed based on past theories of media’s societal role, and one of the outcomes commonly associated with media literacy

education. Nevertheless, these assumptions limit the study in that they are not proven outcomes of successful media literacy education.

The limitations inherent in this study are products of the decisions that needed to be made to ensure a successful study in terms of its contributions to media studies, media education, and academia. Media literacy continues to grow in popularity, scope, and inclusion. However, if it continues to grow with little unified direction in the university, it may continue to unintentionally result in less than desirable learning outcomes. These consequences are similar to the risk all media educators take if they do not evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching.

While this study may not be fully representative, it should begin a discussion about what the second half of the media literacy experience should look like. What are the specific connections? What ways should students think about media? What examples are great? Which should we avoid? How do we connect with as many students as possible? To what end? Such questions must be answered before post-secondary media literacy can solidify a place in the university. The framework of Chapter 6 is a way to begin to find the answers to this question. Connecting the two-halves—skills and dispositions—is the end goal.

### **A Post-Secondary Media Literate Student Body**

It is rather premature to attempt to provide a concrete single foundation that connects media literacy education to media literate citizenship. More rigorous research,

exploration, and evaluation are needed. This study is only the beginning. However, it is the beginning of a discussion that has at its core the defense of good citizenship and participatory democracy.

University students are poised to become the leaders of progressive societies around the world. They will uphold the foundations that provide future generations the same freedoms past publics' have been afforded. They are the same adults who will be providing present generations with the means to grow old in peace and be granted protection, freedom, and civility.

Cynical dispositions towards media are perhaps commonplace in the university. Most students in their late-teens and early-twenties are engaging with new lifestyles, new knowledge, new understandings, and new ideologies. They are quizzical and critical, ready to question and judge at any point they see fit. One challenge of post-secondary education is to aid such inquiring minds in channeling their curiosities into rational and engaging thought. They are expected to confront the dominant political, cultural and ideological structures in society. Educators must make such confrontations knowledgeable, logical, and informed.

The challenge of the university is both immediate and longitudinal. Students must see the complexities of society in each specific course they take. They must also combine their course experiences to form a rational understanding of their personal world and the larger world around them.

This exploration is not reflective of all or any single part of a post-secondary institution. Nor is it representative of any particular course or department. It does, however, speak to the aim of media literacy education. The experiences here, however small, point to a general concern. At the conclusion of a media literacy course, students should be able to critically analyze media. They should further be able to connect their newfound analytic abilities to the media that they see outside of the classroom. This includes looking “deeper” at media, but it also includes looking “smarter” at media. It means understanding that cynicism rarely produces change or reform. It means understanding that every individual in Western society is dependent on media for local and global information. It means adopting and adapting such information to become an aware media citizen. Only then will the true benefits of media literacy become apparent.

In the meantime, students learn skills but not significance. Educators must not stop to think they have succeeded based on test scores and essay analyses. They must ask if they have succeeded in enlightening students with the ability to be both critical and aware; both skeptical and informed.

This study was not entirely negative. Half of the post-secondary media literacy puzzle is complete. Effective educational outcomes were attained. Media literacy advocates will be pleased to see such large scale experimental results in favor of media literacy education in the university. They can point to the attainment of the necessary skills students “need” to become critical media consumers. These points should not be lost in the larger

concerns of the dispositions that accompany those skills. As this study discovered, students increased their ability to analyze, evaluate, and comprehend broadcast, print, and online media messages. This is a significant beginning for advocating the implementation of media literacy in the university.

*Beyond Cynicism: How Media Literacy Can Make Students More Engaged Citizens* is a call to media literacy scholars, university administrators, and educators in general, to ask themselves, “What are my students learning”? Media literacy is an approach to a form of media education that allows students to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media, but also to understand what these media abilities mean to students’ larger values, views, opinions, and beliefs. If this transfer is not addressed, media education runs the risk of never truly educating.

## APPENDICES

### **Appendix A: Origins of Media Literacy – UK, Australia, Canada**

Decades before surfacing in the United States, media literacy education originated in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada.<sup>69</sup> In these countries, the media education movement originated from numerous classroom initiatives in response to the birth of the motion picture as a mass entertainment medium. These countries have since been commonly recognized as the global leaders of the media literacy movement.

*The United Kingdom:* The United Kingdom is often credited as the founder of the media education discipline. Their media literacy movement stretches as far back as the 1930's, when teachers began to advocate that children learn about motion pictures. The British media literacy movement stemmed predominantly from a cultural studies approach to media texts. This approach to media education advocates participatory approaches to education and cultural dispositions towards the media (Masterman, 1985).

Britain has implemented standards for media education in its primary and secondary schools throughout the English studies track. At the same time, Britain still struggles to institute teacher training initiatives relating to media education. Further, the assessment of media literacy initiatives remains quite scant throughout the UK (Heins & Cho, 2003).

Over the last decade, however, contributions from seminal media education scholar

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<sup>69</sup> It should be known that these countries did and generally still do enjoy more centralized educational systems than the United States and thus have had an easier time implementing media literacy programs on a national or regional level (Heins & Cho, 2003).

David Buckingham and others have led to a steady rise of the presence of media as an educational standard for secondary and pre-college entry exams in education.

*Australia:* Media education has existed in Australian schools since the 1970's, based on an integrated approach to K-12 curricular initiatives (Hobbs, 1998). Many of the current media education theories and initiatives in the United States draw from the Australian education system. The Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) also contributed significantly to the initial integration standards for media education in K-12 schools. Australia is one of the few countries that has integrated teacher training platforms for media education.

Two Australians are responsible for developing what is commonly regarded as the first empirical measurement for media literacy. In 1993, Robyn Quin of Edith Cowan University and Barrie McMahon of the Western Australian Ministry of Education developed a quantitative media education measure with ninth-graders in an English class. Their study has served as the foundation for all other empirical outcome-based media literacy research to date, which is still rare. It is also the foundation for the experiment employed in this particular study.

*Canada:* Canada hosts one of the strongest national media education movements in the world. The Media Awareness Network,<sup>70</sup> one of the preeminent organizations devoted to media literacy, was started by Canadian media educators and remains one of the most comprehensive resources for media literacy. Like Britain, Canada's media education

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<sup>70</sup> See <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/index.cfm>.

origins stem from early initiatives in screen education. For a brief period, Canada reverted to concentrating on educational initiatives for basic literacy, but returned to media education in the 1990s (Arke, 2005).

The Canadian educational establishment has mandated media education platforms in grades 7-12 for almost two decades (Kubey, 1998). Ontario's Ministry of Education made media literacy a mandatory part of its curriculum in 1987. According to Marjorie Heins & Christina Cho (2003) of the Free Expression Policy Center:

Media studies is one of four compulsory strands of Ontario's English curriculum for grades 9-12, alongside reading, writing, and language. Similarly, "media communication skills" are a part of the requisite English program at every grade level from 1-8. The province's curricular guidelines contain detailed requirements in both media analysis and production-oriented projects (p. 37).

Canada's *Association for Media Literacy* publishes a media literacy protocol guide, which has been translated into numerous languages, and is adopted by education ministries around the world. Canada's government has created nation-wide media education guidelines in order to avoid discrepancy and centralize its media education guidelines. Canada, in terms of K-12 education, is often seen as the global pioneer in the media literacy movement.

## **Appendix B: Situating the Media Effects Tradition in the Media Education Landscape**

Media effects theories have played an important and necessary role in media literacy. Three specific theories—cultivation, agenda-setting, and uses and gratifications—relate strongly to the teaching and learning outcomes commonly associated with media literacy. Media literacy, as an educational response to “media effects,” embraces past theories of media effects by teaching how to be aware, informed, and understanding of the different ways and extents to which media have “effects” on individuals and societies.

Showing these three theories in light of the intended teaching and learning outcomes of media literacy can further expose media literacy’s relevance to an informed and active citizenry, aware of the complex effects of the media.

### ***Powerful Effects: Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory***

In the 1960’s and 1970’s, amidst a growing debate about violent television programming and its influence on viewers, George Gerbner and his associates at the University of Pennsylvania developed the theory of media cultivation. Media cultivation is predicated on the idea that media ‘accumulate effects’ on individual viewers. Simply put, Gerbner’s theory stated that television *cultivates* peoples’ beliefs. Through research that utilized heavy, medium, and light television viewers, Gerbner argued that over longer periods of time television cultivated consciousness. He believed that media, specifically television, dictated what was good and bad for society, and furthermore

shaped perceptions of society (Newbold, 1995). This theory positioned media as an all powerful tool exerting significant influence on those exposed to it, thus shaping people's conceptions of social reality.

While Gerbner's cultivation analysis was largely pivotal in galvanizing the powerful effects advocates, its shortcomings were evident. The main criticism of the theory was its inability to gain conclusive testing and data to reinforce its assertions. Gerbner's experiments were only conducted over relatively short times, and thus his data could not control for the long term effects he supposed media had on people (Sparks, 2002).

Cultivation theory also did not account for any other factors that could lead to individual behavior, ignoring the numerous variables that exist in the relationship between the individual and the media. Gerbner viewed the audience as "being composed of a heterogeneous mass of passive individuals, shorn of all links with each other, and who come to share an identical vision of the world under the prompting of the media" (Piette & Giroux, 1997, p. 100).

Gerbner was a staunch defender of the powerful and sustained impact of television on the culture of violence in America, writing:

Media undoubtedly contribute in major, if not exclusive, ways to the creation of a culture of violence that has now invaded every home. But whatever real-life violence media directly incite (and estimates suggest at most five percent), its full cost and significance is far greater" (Gerbner, 1996, p. 27).

Gerbner's analyses, despite visible omissions and inconsistencies, significantly contributed to the theories that define the powerful effects agenda.

Few would doubt that media, and prominently television, influence culture. Young adults in the U.S. spend roughly six hours of their day, outside of school/work, with media (Kaiser, 2005). The debate, then, is not whether or not television has any effect on viewers, but to what extent. The key concept that advocates of the powerful effects tradition have yet to justify is whether or not media *alone* is the conduit for such violence. Can Gerbner's media cultivation theory account for television being the main factor for violence? David Buckingham (2005) argues quite the opposite:

In my view, the debate about media violence is really a political one. One of the big causes of violent crime in the United States – and one reason why it is so much more violent than many other countries – is to do with the easy availability of weapons. There are more guns in the US than people. But this is something that politicians seem unable to control, even if they say they want to... what they can do, though, is to make big principled statements about the dangers of the media – although here again, the extent to which they have ever really done anything to regulate the media is pretty limited. And they can also fund research that seems to support their argument... (p. 3).

The 'effects' of media are inevitable. But as Buckingham argues, they may be one part of a larger cultural and societal pool of factors that lead to the makeup of violence in a society, or any other cultural trait, characteristic, action, or perception. In today's society, television is far more invasive and interactive than when Gerbner conducted his research. Media educators must be highly cognizant of the influence of reality TV shows, sitcoms, and teen dramas on American youth. However, to say that these shows exclusively cultivate a new 'social reality' is both bold and controversial.

How can society best understand and utilize the cultivation theory of media to raise critical understanding about the possible effects of television? Gerbner's analysis and

theory can be utilized for teaching about television and the construction of stereotypes, realities, and ideals. Media educators can use the cultivation theory to discuss how news media choose to display victims of natural disasters, terrorists, or violent and traumatic acts, to cultivate critical awareness, reflection and understanding of the possible influences of television. Media education will also benefit from teaching the “positive effects” of television.

Gerbner’s cultivation theory gave significant attention to the television and its role in societal violence. In the context of media education, Gerbner’s theory is the base for a larger discussion about television, violence, and the media. Media education can provide the critical skills for viewing violence in the media and the ability to understand television’s influences within the complex media effects landscape.

### ***Situational Effects: McCombs and Shaw’s Agenda Setting***

Situational media effects apply to scenarios in which the media convey messages through an agenda tailored to a specific issue or event. In the late 1960’s Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw conducted research on the Nixon/Humphrey Presidential campaign debates. Their exploration resulted in the formation of the agenda-setting theory. McCombs and Shaw found that the news media selected the campaign issues they believed would garner the most national interest and focused on them to such an extent that these few issues became the dominant focal points of the entire election. Out of this analysis came the idea that: “The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people *what to think*, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers *what to think about*” (Cohen, 1963, p. 155).

Much like Gerbner's cultivation theory, agenda setting fails to address the audience in its analysis. Unlike the cultivation theory, however, agenda-setting does not assume a cultivation of social reality but instead sees media influence primarily concerning mainstream local and national issues as they arise. McCombs and Shaw's theory assumed a base causal relationship between the content of the media message and the public perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day (Newbold, 1995).

The media set public agendas for issues they believe will attract the largest number of viewers. Motivation for certain coverage often depends on the current political and economic climates of the United States. If a politician's approval ratings have fallen, media may focus on the issues they believe are causing the decline. Conversely, the media may attempt to reverse a ratings dip by refocusing their coverage of a candidate to highlight his or her positive attributes. It comes as little surprise that news that attracts most of the public to follow politics is largely partisan, sensational and controversial. Should John Kerry's Vietnam War record have become a focal point of the 2004 Presidential election? The answer is irrelevant, but the media found the controversy in the Kerry situation to be attractive to viewers, and so they effectively "set the agenda." How then, does agenda setting fit into the effects debate?

Media education can address the agenda setting theory by teaching a set of skills that enables people to ask the right questions about the choices the media make about news coverage. Media education claims to provide people the necessary media viewing skills

to set the agenda that they feel is most important. Why does a story warrant so much attention? What are the implications of such long and sustained coverage of an issue? What motivates such coverage? What is being left out of the coverage? What agenda is the coverage purporting? What are alternative agendas? How else can this agenda be reported? Understanding why media chose certain issues to focus on can lead to a more inquisitive public. As a result, media may be burdened with expanding and broadening the diversity of their coverage to reflect an increasingly interested, informed, and demanding public.

McCombs and Shaw's contribution to the effects tradition and to the field of media education is substantial. Their work led to increased understanding of choice and motivation for highlighting certain issues at the expense of others. Agenda setting, in general, shows that in certain situations media can dictate what the public will pay attention to. Media literacy education attempts to expand the agenda by teaching the public to ask more questions and thus demand more coverage.

***Limited Effects: Blumler, Katz, and Gurevitch's Uses and Gratifications***

In the mid-twentieth century, mass communication researchers began to question effects' theories that presumed the mass media had direct and overwhelming influence on individuals. New theories began to evolve around the notions of selective exposure, perception and retention, and *uses and gratifications*.

The uses and gratifications theory stated that the effects of media depend on the way in which individuals selectively use media – in short what people *want* from the media. If

people want to find information—actively seek it out and use it—then this information will have a powerful effect on them. Alternatively, if people use media as a form of escapism, entertainment, or social relaxation, it will have little effect on them. Thus, uses & gratifications, unlike the other strands of effects research, considered the audience to be individual, active decision-makers in their relationship with media. They were not passive masses subject to heavy media influence.

In 1974, seminal media scholars Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz published *The Uses of Mass Communication*. Included in this book was a seven-point outline (Table 7), which, composed with Professor Michael Gurevitch, presented the parameters of media uses and gratifications. This outline addressed the “social and psychological origin of needs, and how such needs relate to media” (Newbold, 1995, p. 121). To construct their uses and gratifications theory, Blumler, Katz, and Gurevitch explored individual time spent with television, analyzing variables such as companionship, relaxation, passing time, arousal, and habit. From those studies, the displacement hypothesis – time spent watching television takes away from time spent on other important activities – was born; as was the attempt to link television watching and obesity (Sparks, 2002).

**Table 7**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>The Seven Point Outline for the Uses &amp; Gratifications Theory</b></p>
<p style="text-align: center;">(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (6) need gratifications and (7) other consequences, perhaps most noticeably unintended ones.</p> <p><small><b>Source:</b> Katz, Blumler, &amp; Gurevitch. 1974. Utilization of mass communication by the individual. In J. G. Blumler &amp; E. Katz (Eds.), <i>The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research</i> (p. 20). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.</small></p>

The main criticism of the uses and gratifications theory is its methodology. The uses and gratifications studies relied heavily on individual self-reporting of time spent with media. Such data is subject to the trust of individuals' accuracy in reporting data. Participants may report how many hours they would like to spend with media rather than how many hours they actually spend with media. Nevertheless, the uses and gratifications theory remains influential to the effects tradition, and substantially contributes to the notion of an active audience of media users.

How does the limited effects tradition inform media literacy? Media educators should see that all media are *used* by an audience, to some degree of *gratification*. In the present, media users can attain diverse and relevant information from a large variety of sources. These choices should ultimately reflect a healthy mix of entertainment, leisure media and civically-relevant information. The choices that *uses* and *gratifications* address are the

departure points for media literacy. Those who understand how to *use* media for both leisure and civic *gratification* can become more aware and empowered individuals. They also learn to enjoy media, and find the most relevant information for their personal and public choices.

Media literacy must teach how to intelligently use media. It must teach how to find the information that is most relevant to users—whether for entertainment or civic purposes.

In an age where information is borderless and available at the click of a mouse, *uses and gratifications* are highly relevant concerning audience media use and media choice. With more options and modes of communication than ever before, this model of effects is highly relevant to media literacy education.

## Appendix C: Media Literacy Skills Assessment Test

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

### RADIO MEASURE

1. How many hours a day do teens spend listening to music?
  - a. 0 – 1 hours
  - b. 1.5 – 2.5 hours
  - c. 2.5 – 3.5 hours
  - d. more than 4 hours
2. The Rand Foundation, who conducted the study, was described as a \_\_\_\_\_?
  - a. liberal think-tank
  - b. conservative think-tank
  - c. private research firm
  - d. public government organization
3. The example given in the story compared a song from 98Degrees with lyrics from a song by the artist \_\_\_\_\_:
  - a. Ja Rule
  - b. Jay Z
  - c. Usher
  - d. Kid Rock
4. Steven Martino, who conducted the study, defined sexually degrading lyrical content as sex that is \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. meaningful
  - b. good
  - c. inconsequential
  - d. unprotected
5. Danielle Smith, Editor of Vibe Magazine, suggests we should \_\_\_\_\_ to black teens.
  - a. provide work and love
  - b. provide opportunity
  - c. give money
  - d. give a voice

*Open-ended Questions:*

Please briefly summarize the message (use the who, what, when, where, why, and how structure to write about the message):

What is the purpose of the message? (Check all that apply): \_\_\_ to inform, \_\_\_ to persuade, \_\_\_ to entertain, \_\_\_ self-expression, \_\_\_ to teach, \_\_\_ to make money.

Identify the sender of this message. Where did the information originate?

What information or points of view may be missing from this message?

How does the sender attract and hold your attention? (Check all that apply): \_\_\_ the use of sound, \_\_\_ multiple voices, \_\_\_ word choices, \_\_\_ expert opinion \_\_\_ music. Others:

What does this information suggest about sexually explicit lyrics and teen sexual behavior in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America?

How has this message changed what you believe about sexually explicit lyrics and teens?

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Television Measure**

1. The terrorists were targeting a subway in:
  - a. Los Angeles
  - b. New York City
  - c. Philadelphia
  - d. Toronto
  
2. According to reports, an informant told U.S. intelligence that the men, referred to as “pharmacists,” came from \_\_\_\_\_ and were trained terrorists linked to Al Qaeda
  - a. Afghanistan
  - b. Iraq
  - c. Pakistan
  - d. United States
  
3. The story contained a snippet of a news clip of \_\_\_\_\_ speaking to the NYC press.
  - a. Bill Clinton
  - b. Rudy Giuliani
  - c. Michael Bloomberg
  - d. George Bush
  
4. According to news anchor Bob Schaeffer, the \_\_\_\_\_ was not taking the terrorist threat seriously.
  - a. Federal Bureau of Investigation
  - b. New York Police Department
  - c. Central Intelligence Agency
  - d. Department of Homeland Security
  
5. A suspicious bottle was found and confiscated at:
  - a. Central Station
  - b. Inner Harbor
  - c. Penn Station
  - d. South Station

*Open-ended Questions:*

Please briefly summarize the message (use the who, what, when, where, why, and how structure to write about the message):

What is the purpose of the message? (check all that apply):  to inform,  to persuade,  to entertain,  self-expression,  to teach,  to make money.

Identify the sender of this message. Where did the information originate?

What information or points of view may be missing from this message?

How does the sender attract and hold your attention? (check all that apply):  the use of color,  lighting,  movement,  the use of sound,  camera angles,  music.

What does this information suggest about the effectiveness of terrorist prevention in the United States?

How has this message changed what you believe about the way in which terrorism and safety are handled in the United States?

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**PRINT MEASURE**

1. Vail Resorts Inc. is purchasing \_\_\_\_\_ from a Boulder, Colorado. based company called Renewable Choice Energy
  - a. Hydroelectric power
  - b. Wind mills
  - c. Steam powered chair lifts
  - d. Wind power credits
  
2. What percentage of its energy use is Vail Resorts planning to purchase?
  - a. 25%
  - b. 50%
  - c. 75%
  - d. 100%
  
3. According to the story, this initiative makes Vail Resorts second in using Wind power to which other company?
  - a. Trader Joe's
  - b. Wal-Mart
  - c. McDonalds
  - d. Whole Foods
  
4. Renewable Choice CEO Quayle Hodek likens purchasing alternative energy as an additional cost of \_\_\_\_\_ per month for a single household to do the same.
  - a. 5
  - b. 10
  - c. 15
  - d. 20
  
5. To offset the expense of purchasing this power, Vail Resorts is offering the following incentive to its customers:
  - a. gift certificates to Whole Foods
  - b. free lift ticket if the homeowner also uses Renewable Choice Energy
  - c. A promotional sticker that reads "I preserve the environment"
  - d. reduced cost for using the food court at Vail Resorts ski mountains

*Open-ended Questions:*

Please briefly summarize the message (use the who, what, when, where, why, and how structure to write about the message):

What is the purpose of the message? (check all that apply): \_\_\_ to inform, \_\_\_ to persuade, \_\_\_ to entertain, \_\_\_ self-expression, \_\_\_ to teach, \_\_\_ to make money.

Identify the sender of this message. Where did the information originate?

What information or points of view may be missing from this message?

How does the sender attract and hold your attention? (check all that apply): \_\_\_ the use of language, \_\_\_ quotes, \_\_\_ expert opinion, \_\_\_ human interest, \_\_\_ emotions. Other:

What does this information suggest about using alternative sources of energy?

How has this message changed what you believe about alternative energy in America?

## Appendix D: Past Experimental Measurements of Media Literacy

*One* – Australian media educators Robyn Quin and Barrie McMahon, in 1991, administered a ground-breaking study in media education. Their study, “Media Analysis: Performance in Media in Western Australian Government Schools 1991,” published initially by the *Australian Ministry of Education* and reprinted in the *Canadian Journal of Educational Communication*, assessed media comprehension and analysis skills of approximately 1,500 high school students in Western Australia (Quin & McMahon, 1991). It is widely considered the first quantitative assessment of media literacy education skills in the world.

Quin and McMahon asked the randomly selected students to analyze a clip from a popular TV sitcom and to analyze newspaper advertisements. The students were then asked to answer a series of pencil & paper multiple choice and open-ended questions dealing with the media segment they viewed. Based on Australian national media analysis standards, a group of media educators developed a media analysis continuum which identified two strands of media analysis comprehension:

1. A *Content* Strand employing the organizers of *Language* and *Narrative*
2. A *Context* Strand containing the organizers of *Production/Circulation*, *Audiences*, and *Values* (Quin & McMahon, 1991).

Further, ten levels of difficulty were developed for each of the organizers. These levels were used to code the student responses to the media they viewed and responded to on the questionnaire tests. For example, the levels of difficulty for the *Language* organizer were as follows:

1. Identifies simple iconic symbols (e.g. No Smoking Signs)
2. Links simple arbitrary symbols to their meaning
3. Identifies symbolic significance of color, gesture, expression. Identifies symbolic use of music, voice. Distinguishes one shot from the next in the sequence
4. Selects appropriate images to establish a given mood. Identifies shot types
5. Recognizes the organization of symbols into codes. Link shot types to a purpose. Selects and organizes images and sound to match a given mood
6. Identifies editing techniques for continuity. Identifies the emotive value of language, especially as it applies to race and gender
7. Identifies medium-specific conventions in continuity editing
8. Links some codes to cultural values
9. Recognizes the values operating in a given product (i.e. family sitcom)
10. Analyzes a complete media product in terms of the cultural values it reflects/projects (e.g. the patterns, codes and conventions of a complete news program) (Quin & McMahon, 1993).

After administering the test to all 1,500 students, the researchers found that most students' results fell in the mid-range level of difficulty (4 to 5). Less than 10% of the population scored a six or higher. Based on these findings, Quin and McMahon (1993) concluded that:

Most students have many of the basic skills of media analysis, but have not yet reached a stage where these can be used to effect. The existence of basic skills is encouraging, but unless students develop the capacity to make the link between particular media texts and the broader cultural context, the skills have little value.

Quin and McMahon's test and measurement instrument have been reproduced on numerous occasions. Their 1991 study proved that students displayed a certain skill level, but perhaps not one that reflects strong critical engagement with media. It was groundbreaking in its attempt to measure what students were learning about media in the classroom.

**Two** – In 2003, Babson College Professors Renee Hobbs and Richard Frost adapted Quin and McMahon's measure to evaluate media literacy skills in a high school in New

England. Hobbs and Frost assessed ninth-grade students enrolled in a course on media and communication.<sup>71</sup> After building and implementing a media literacy curriculum in coordination with school administrators and advising the participating teachers on media literacy classroom teaching skills, Hobbs and Frost administered the test pre-post, and utilized a control group of similar students in a regular ninth grade English class at a neighboring school.

This study was designed to evaluate the impact of media literacy instruction by “determining its effects on students’ reading, listening and viewing comprehension, writing, and message-analysis skills” (Hobbs & Frost, 2003, p. 338). The study measured students’ comprehension and message-analysis skills after exposure to three media messages: news-magazine article, an NPR audio news commentary, and a television news segment.

Hobbs and Frost found that, almost unanimously, students who received media literacy instruction displayed greater analysis skills than the control-group students when identifying message construction practices across print, audio, and television news. Evidence from this study also supports the arguments by scholars that media literacy instruction may help students better situate themselves in sociopolitical contexts, as evidenced by their ability to critically view and respond to media messages (Giroux & Simon, 1989). According to the authors, this is the first type of media literacy skills assessment research conducted in the United States:

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<sup>71</sup> The high school that participated in the study agreed to have mandatory media and communication curriculum infused into their school’s English track.

As the first large-scale empirical work measuring the acquisition of media literacy skills in the United States, this research provides suggestive evidence that incorporating the analysis of media messages into the curriculum can enhance literacy skills development (Hobbs & Frost, 2003, p. 352).

This study has been often regarded as the most comprehensive study on media literacy in K-12 education in the United States.

**Three** – Only one study, a doctoral dissertation, has explored the effectiveness of media literacy at the higher education level. In 2005, Edward Arke, now Chair of the Communication Department at Messiah College in Pennsylvania, completed a dissertation at Duquesne University titled: “Media Literacy and Critical Thinking: Is there a connection”?

Arke adapted Hobbs and Frost’s 2003 media literacy skills assessment test for the media education course he taught at Duquesne University. Arke used educational learning taxonomies—also utilized in Quin and McMahon’s 1991 study—to situate the relationship between the media literacy instrument and his proposed outcomes. He then administered the test in one class setting (no pre-post measurements were taken), and compared it to the California Critical Thinking Skills Test (CCTST), which was administered to the same class, only weeks after the media literacy test. Arke’s sample size was thirty-four students, and no control was utilized.

Arke found significant correlation in the attainment of media literacy skills and increased critical thinking skills. Arke’s study, while valuable in its design and conception, does not

contain any methodological rigor. Arke did, however, provide a sound adaptation of the past studies for the university.

All three past empirical investigations have provided media literacy a solid foundation from which rigorous measurement and evaluation can continue. This dissertation aims to build on these past explorations by providing another version of the experimental methods used over the last two decades. These past examples were crucial to the successful development, implementation and infusion of the media literacy skills assessment test used here.

## Appendix E: Pre-Test Survey

NAME (First/Last): \_\_\_\_\_

If you are Under 18, please check here: \_\_\_\_\_

### PRE-TEST SURVEY

Class Standing: Freshman    Sophomore    Junior    Senior

Gender: Male Female

Age: Under 18    18-24    Over 24

Ethnicity:

African American/Black

Biracial/Multiracial

White Americans/European Americans/Caucasians

Hispanic/Latino/Latina

Asian American/Pacific Islander

Native American/American Indian

Arab American

Other

Parents level of education:

*Mother*

NONE

Some High School

Complete High School

Completed Undergraduate University Degree

Complete Graduate Degree (Masters/PhD)

*Father*

NONE

Some High School

Complete High School

Complete Undergrad Degree

Complete Grad Degree

Previous media literacy education:

NONE

Some exposure: in Grade School / High School / College

Formal class: in Grade School / High School / College

More than one formal class

Media Consumption:

Light—(0-3 hours per day)

Medium—(4-7 hours per day)

Heavy—(8+ hours per day)

College major: \_\_\_\_\_

State/Country where most of your previous education occurred: \_\_\_\_\_

Have you ever voted before?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

Do you belong to any volunteer organizations?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, please list: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you read the newspaper?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If yes, which paper(s): \_\_\_\_\_

How often do you read the paper?

Every Day: \_\_\_\_\_ A few days here and there: \_\_\_\_\_ Only Sundays: \_\_\_\_\_

How do you find out most about the happenings of your town/community? (please label these in order of your use (1=most, 5=least))

TV \_\_\_\_\_

Internet \_\_\_\_\_

Print (magazines/newspapers) \_\_\_\_\_

Radio \_\_\_\_\_

Word of mouth \_\_\_\_\_

How do you find out most about the happenings of your country? (please label these in order of your use (1=most, 5=least))

TV \_\_\_\_\_

Internet \_\_\_\_\_

Print (magazines/newspapers) \_\_\_\_\_

Radio \_\_\_\_\_

Word of mouth \_\_\_\_\_

How do you find out most about the happenings of global/international affairs? (please label these in order of your use (1=most, 5=least))

TV \_\_\_\_\_

Internet \_\_\_\_\_

Print (magazines/newspapers) \_\_\_\_\_

Radio \_\_\_\_\_

Word of mouth \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix F: Open-Ended Questions: Coding Protocol

**Q1: COMPREHENSION – Please briefly summarize the message (use the who, what, when, where, why, and how structure to write about the message):**

5: *Who, what, when where, why and how* are all included and explained fully, with reflection, clear understanding and thorough analysis. The student understands the text, and adds additional analysis and reflection beyond the full summary.

4: The answer includes all aspects of the summary, but no further statements are included that explain the summary. The answer clearly displays a strong sense of understanding of the message.

3: Three to Four of the six summary points were addressed in the answer.

2: The student essentially offers one brief statement, but clearly shows no attempt to address all aspects of the message.

1: The response is irrelevant, shows no understanding of the text, or there is no response at all.

**Q2: COMPREHENSION – What is the purpose of the message? (Check all that apply):** \_\_\_ to inform, \_\_\_ to persuade, \_\_\_ to entertain, \_\_\_ self-expression, \_\_\_ to teach, \_\_\_ to make money

5: Checked all 5 items

4: Checked 4 items

3: Checked 2 - 3 items

2: Checked 1 item

1: Did not check any of the items

**Q3: ANALYSIS – Identify the sender of this message. Where did the information originate?**

5: Mentioned the actual name of the organization, individual senders of the information, and the origination of the message (if from a study, or an event, etc.). Adds additional analysis and reflection about how the sender of the message AND origination of the information influences the information.

4: The answer identifies the sender and origination of the message, and adds an additional analysis about EITHER the sender of the message OR the origination of the information.

3: Identifies the sender and origination of the information clearly and comprehensively. Does not add additional reflection or specifics.

2: A brief sentence about the message with little to no substance or attempt to provide thorough analysis.

1: The response is irrelevant, shows no understanding of the text, or there is no response at all.

**Q4: ANALYSIS – What information or points of view may be missing from this message?**

5: Identifies more than one piece of information or point of view not included in the message. Adds an additional sentence(s) that explains the impact of the missing information.

- 4: Mentions more than one piece of information or point of view that was not included in the message.
- 3: Alludes to one piece of information or one point of view that may have been missing. Displays a level of understanding, but with no thorough analysis or reflection.
- 2: Answered that no information or point of view was missing from the story.
- 1: The response is irrelevant, shows no understanding of the text, or there is no response at all.

**Q5: ANALYSIS – How does the sender attract and hold your attention? (Check all that apply):** \_\_\_ the use of sound, \_\_\_ multiple voices, \_\_\_ word choices, \_\_\_ expert opinion \_\_\_ music. Others:

- 5: Checked all 5 items
- 4: Checked 4 items
- 3: Checked 2 - 3 items
- 2: Checked 1 item
- 1: Did not check any of the items

**Q6: EVALUATION – What does this information suggest about the issue discussed?**

- 5: Provides more than one suggestion about the general theme of the message. Then reinforces the suggestions through detailed and through analysis and reflection, and personal engagement with the issue.
- 4: Provides more than one suggestion about the general theme of the message, AND reinforces the suggestions through a brief personal anecdote.
- 3: Provides more than one suggestion about the general theme of the message, but adds no critical analysis or reflection of the issue.
- 2: In a brief sentence, the answer provides one suggestion about the general theme of the message, with no further analysis.
- 1: Said the information did not suggest anything new or different, or does not mention any suggestion.

**Q7: EVALUATION– How has this message changed what you believe about the issue discussed?**

- 5: Provides one or more ways in which this message did or did not change personal belief, and added a thorough analysis of why this change(s) did or did not occur through analysis and personal reflection.
- 4: Provides one way in which the message did or did not change personal belief, with more than one additional reason for why this change did or did not occur.
- 3: Mentions one way in which the message did or did not change personal belief about the issue, with one additional reason for why this change did or did not occur.
- 2: Said it did not do/change any personal belief.
- 1: The response is irrelevant, shows no understanding of the text, or there is no response at all.

## **Appendix G: Focus Group Rational and Question Protocol**

The focus group has served as an effective research tool for over fifty years, and more predominantly in academia over the last twenty years (Greenbaum, 2000). A focus group is broadly defined as “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (Goss & Leinbach, 1996, p. 116) The main aim of the focus group is to attain an open level of interaction between participants, drawing upon their beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and experiences (Gibbs, 1997). This is what differentiates the dynamic of the focus group from the interview, ethnography, or participant observation.

The role of the moderator in focus groups is vital to the overall effectiveness of the session. The moderator controls and dictates participation during the session, and ensures that the topic goals and guidelines are met. If the authority of the moderator is questioned, or the topic is not clearly explained, the focus group risks failure (Greenbaum, 2000). As there is no set moderation behavior in qualitative research, the role of the moderator is highly subjective and unpredictable. However, certain traits may reinforce successful moderation. Those include strategic planning, organization, analysis, communication, and friendliness (Greenbaum, 2000).

There are two possible pitfalls in over-specifying the agenda and structure of a focus group session. First, participants may attempt to follow the moderator’s detailed thinking; and second, a detailed introduction may cause resistance and over-thinking in responding

to a comment (Morgan, 2004). In the sessions conducted for this dissertation, the moderator often used humor to create and maintain a relaxed atmosphere, letting the participants know that this would be a free and open dialogue session. All language, opinion, and dissent were allowed during the sessions, and the students were urged to express themselves both openly and honestly.

A further aim of these particular focus groups was to achieve a level of “produced informality.” Skilled moderation requires the ability to place people in a relaxed atmosphere in which they are encouraged, through informality, to participate in an open and free manner (Puchta & Potter, 2004). Certain traits, such as laughter, ‘oh’ receipts to comments, brief anecdotal asides, and word choice that is suggestive of informal conversation, all add to the created state of informality (Puchta & Potter, 2004). In these particular focus group sessions, the researcher began by joking about how these sessions would result in the students becoming “financially wealthy.” In addition, the introduction portion of the focus groups consisted of students introducing themselves by mentioning how they receive most of their news, and revealing to the group their favorite sitcom. Anecdotal stories and asides reinforced the informality that was successfully attained in each session.

Focus groups are also subject to numerous limitations and possible problem areas. Main limitations of focus group research include biases, difficulty in distinguishing between individual and group views, difficulty in making generalizations, difficulty of analysis and interpretation of results (Litosselliti, 2003). These characteristics were minimized by

adhering to the focus group protocol explained above and through careful and meticulous transcription and analysis.

### *Question Protocol*<sup>72</sup>

#### **Introduction (with consent forms)**

- What is your name?
- Which way do you specifically get most of your news?
- And what is your favorite sitcom?

#### **45 Minutes – Relevance and Credibility in Media**

- Do the media do a good job in providing the relevant information?
- Do you think you are in touch with your country and what is happening politically?
- Do news media do a good job in providing necessary, credible and deep coverage?
- What do you think is the relationship between information and citizenship?
- How much impact do you think media has on democracy/society? Can you give some examples?
- How do you form an opinion on World issues? If everything you get through the major networks, how do you get a full range, informed opinion?
- What is civic awareness to you? Examples?
- How big an impact do you think media have on your political beliefs? Give some examples? If not, why not?
- Do you think, overall, that learning about news, information, and media in general changes or enhances how you view this country, American democracy, and what being a citizen means? Probe here, specific examples...

#### **15 Minutes – Media Literacy**

- What do you think being a media literate person entails?
- Considering how much time you spend with media—do you think learning about media functions and practices would affect how you interact with media?
- Can you provide some examples? Advertising? News? If not, why not?
- Describe some possible influences that education about media can have on college students.
- Describe some ways in which you think media has the ability to make you more aware?

#### **Wrap-Up**

- *Anything anyone would like to add at all, that we haven't discussed?*
- *Any Questions? Thanks!*

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<sup>72</sup> The questions in this protocol were not asked systematically, or read directly from the protocol. Rather, they were used as guidelines to keep the discussion on track, and to ensure that all relevant topics were address during each conversation.

## Appendix H – Consent Forms

### SAMPLE CONSENT FORM – EXPERIMENT

*Project Title - Assessing Media Literacy Skills in Undergraduates*

#### **Why is this research being done?**

This is a research project being conducted by Susan Moeller at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are at least 18 years of age and enrolled as an undergraduate student at the University of Maryland.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

The procedures involve a media literacy skills assessment test administered at the University of Maryland, during the fall 2006 semester. You will be asked to devote no extra time outside of this class for this research project. The test will consist of you viewing a television news clip, listening to a radio news broadcast, and reading a news article. After each, you will be asked to answer a series of questions concerning what you just saw/heard/read. Each set of questions will take approximately fifteen minutes of your time. The entire test will take approximately one hour.

#### **What about confidentiality?**

We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, (1) your name will not be included in the write up of the focus group sessions; and (2) only the researcher will have access to the information. The focus groups data write-up will not contain information that may personally identify you.

Further, the data collected by administering the test will only be seen by Dr. Susan Moeller, the principle investigator, and Paul Mihailidis, the student investigator. The data will be stored in the student investigator's home office and will be destroyed entirely in the summer of 2007, upon the completion of the course.

If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

In accordance with legal requirements and/or professional standards, we will disclose to the appropriate individuals and/or authorities information that comes to our attention concerning child abuse or neglect or potential harm to you or others.

#### **What are the risks of this research?**

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.

**What are the benefits of this research?**

This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about media literacy education for undergraduate students. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of how media messages impact society and how educating undergraduates about media can lead to a more aware, reflexive and participatory citizenry.

**Do I have to be in this research?**

**May I stop participating at any time?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

**What if I have questions?**

This research is being conducted by Dr. Susan Moeller in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Dr. Susan Moeller at [smoeller@jmail.umd.edu](mailto:smoeller@jmail.umd.edu) 301-405-2419 4109 Journalism Building, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail) [irb@deans.umd.edu](mailto:irb@deans.umd.edu); (telephone) 301-405-0678

This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

**Statement of Age of Subject and Consent**

[Please note: Parental consent always needed for minors.] Your signature indicates that: you are at least 18 years of age; the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.

[Please add name, signature, and date lines to the final page of your consent form]

NAME OF SUBJECT

SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT

DATE

## SAMPLE CONSENT FORM – FOCUS GROUPS

*Project Title - Assessing Media Literacy Skills in Undergraduates*

### **Why is this research being done?**

This is a research project being conducted by Susan Moeller at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are at least 18 years of age and you are enrolled in Journalism 175: Media Literacy. The purpose of this research project is to measure the skills and dispositions gained in this course.

### **What will I be asked to do?**

The procedures involve two focus group sessions during the semester. The entire study you are involved in will be conducted at the University of Maryland, during the fall 2006 semester. You will be asked to devote one hour to audio-taped focus group sessions, outside of class time. The focus group will consist of discussion questions about the role media play in your lives and how the Journalism 175: Media Literacy course has affected how you view media.

### **What about confidentiality?**

We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, (1) your name will not be included in the write up of the focus group sessions; and (2) only the researcher will have access to the information. The focus groups data write-up will not contain information that may personally identify you.

Further, as the focus group sessions will be audiotaped, the recordings will only be heard by Dr. Susan Moeller, the principle investigator, and Paul Mihailidis, the student investigator. The tapes will be stored in the student investigator's home office and will be destroyed entirely in the summer of 2006, upon the completion of the course.

If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

In accordance with legal requirements and/or professional standards, we will disclose to the appropriate individuals and/or authorities information that comes to our attention concerning child abuse or neglect or potential harm to you or others.

### **What are the risks of this research?**

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.

### **What are the benefits of this research?**

This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about media literacy education for undergraduate students. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of how media messages impact society and how educating undergraduates about media can lead to a more aware, reflexive and participatory citizenry.

**Do I have to be in this research?**

**May I stop participating at any time?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

**What if I have questions?**

This research is being conducted by Dr. Susan Moeller in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, College Park. If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact Dr. Susan Moeller at [smoeller@jmail.umd.edu](mailto:smoeller@jmail.umd.edu) 301-405-2419 4109 Journalism Building, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742;  
(e-mail) [irb@deans.umd.edu](mailto:irb@deans.umd.edu); (telephone) 301-405-0678

This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

**Statement of Age of Subject and Consent**

[Please note: Parental consent always needed for minors.] Your signature indicates that: you are at least 18 years of age; the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.

[Please add name, signature, and date lines to the final page of your consent form]

NAME OF SUBJECT

SIGNATURE OF SUBJECT

DATE

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