Beyond Cynicism: Media Education and Civic Learning Outcomes in the University

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Abstract

This article 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 utilizing a sample of 239 University of Maryland undergraduates in a pre-post/control "quasi-experiment" found that the students enrolled in a media literacy course increased their ability to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze media messages in print, video, and audio formats. Based on the positive empirical findings, focus group sessions were conducted within the experimental group and the control group. When the discussions concerned media relevance and credibility, the students from the media literacy class expressed considerable negativity about media's role in society. Preliminarily, these findings suggest that media literacy curricula and readings that are solely or primarily focused on teaching critical analysis skills are an essential first step in teaching media literacy but that the curriculum should not end there. The paper concludes by recommending a way forward for postsecondary media literacy education—one that aims to connect media literacy skills and outcomes that promote active citizenship.

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Introduction: Citizenship in a Hypermedia Age

In the present day, the media have assumed the role of a social institution. Media increasingly provide people with means of connecting with others, help to stabilize everyday routines, and function as a general educational tool (Silverblatt 2004). Buckingham (2003, p. 5) argues,

> 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.

Parallel to their socializing functions, media have unavoidably adopted a civic role: that of preserving and maintaining an informed public. Jenkins (2006) builds on Schudson's (1998; 1999) concept of the *monitorial citizen*—a gatherer, monitor, and surveyor of information, who "swings into public action only when directly threatened" (Lemann 1998)—in his account of the relationship between digital media and citizenship. Jenkins focuses on the ways in which digital media and the Internet have shifted what it means to be an "informed" citizen. In his book *Convergence Culture*, he combines Schudson's musings on citizenship with collective intelligence scholar Levy's (1997) notion of knowledge culture-seeing media users as "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" (Jenkins 2006, p. 227). Jenkins's work highlights the need for a public educated not only about how to interpret media messages but also about the increasingly ubiquitous role of media and information in civic and democratic society. The response to this need, often referred to as media literacy education, is at the core of educational movements aimed at preparing students for lives of active and engaged citizenship.

This paper details the results of a multiyear exploration of a media literacy course in U.S. higher education and seeks to explore whether media literacy education is indeed preparing students to be engaged, aware, and participatory citizens. The study utilized a sample of 239 University of Maryland undergraduates in a pre-post/control quasi-experiment,[1] and a portion of those students in focus groups, to ask what students in a media literacy class learned both in terms of media analysis skills and dispositions toward media's role in civil society. The results show that students learned to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze media messages more effectively but that these skills did not equate to an understanding of the media's role in democratic society. Rather, the students from the media literacy class were quick to discredit or blame media for their shortcomings without reflecting on the nuances of the media's role in their daily lives. The results of this study reveal a need to reevaluate the role of postsecondary media education outcomes to better prepare students for lives of active and inclusive citizenship.

Postsecondary Media Literacy Education: Preparing an Active Citizenry

Media literacy, commonly defined in the United States as the ability to "access, evaluate, analyze and produce all types of communication" (Aufderheide 1993), is predicated not only on enhancing students' media analysis skills but also their ability to critically discern information relevant to their lives and communities. Worsnop (2004, p. 1) writes, "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 21st century culture." At a basic level, successful media literacy education must teach students the critical skills needed to read media effectively. Where media literacy education becomes unique is in its aim to connect critical analysis skills to an understanding of media's larger political and ideological implications (Kellner and Share 2005). While such a connection seems self-evident—if students are taught how to deconstruct and evaluate media messages across all formats, they will become more active and understanding civic participants—rarely have scholars and educators asked how such connections are made or evaluated what strategies can ensure that such outcomes are met. What does it mean to

connect media analysis with political and civic ideologies? How can media literacy move beyond criticism and toward broader understanding and action?

Historically, media literacy pedagogy has assumed that teaching critical analysis skills would result in more engaged and informed individuals. This assumes that if students are provided with a set of evaluative tools to deconstruct media they will be able to analyze messages objectively. In turn, such analytical ability will produce a critical disposition in students (Morgan 1998), which will result in a more nuanced ability to identify and see through the media's attempts to persuade, manipulate, influence, and control. In the United States this approach has commonly been seen as protectionist, a matter of sensitizing students to the negative effects of the media (Buckingham 2005). This protectionist approach to teaching media in the classroom can enable students to feel empowered, but it often hinges on pinpointing the faults of media to create one overarching critique of a message. Such an approach does not address the complexities involved in interacting with media messages; that is, the values brought to a message and the social and cultural constructs around which messages are created (Buckingham 2003). Indeed, as the results of this study show, teaching media criticism alone can be potentially harmful to students.

Beyond Inoculation, toward Empowerment

In the present information age, protecting students against the effects of media is akin to protecting a child from the sun. While educating a child about the potential harms of the sun to the body and skin is smart, 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.

In a 2005 speech titled "Will Media Education Ever Escape the Effects Debate?" Buckingham 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:

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. (Buckingham 2005, p. 20)

Defining media education as an antidote to media effects assumes that the audience is powerless and that the media are all-powerful. Teaching about the effects of media is central to media literacy education. 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 roles that the media perform. If media education does not account for the numerous ways in which media work to keep societies informed, especially in a global age, it will be excluding important media functions from the conversation. Second, couching media literacy in cause-and-effect frameworks ignores the key complexities involved in the civic roles of media. Buckingham (2005, p. 19) argues, "we can only understand the role of the media in the context of other social, historical and cultural forces [. . .] seeing this in terms of simple notions of 'cause and effect' often leads us to ignore the complexity of what we are concerned about." Media literacy educators should not teach about the effects of media with the sole aim of enabling students to protect themselves from media influences. Rather, they should acknowledge the social contexts within which all media are created, and emphasize the personal values and perspectives that all individuals bring to messages. This can allow for a media literacy experience that highlights the connections between media, culture, and society. Only then can media literacy truly reach its potential to move beyond inoculation and toward civic empowerment. As the results of the research presented in this paper show, if media education develops media analysis skills while ignoring the ability to effectively use media to exercise democratic and individual rights (Brownell and Brownell 2003), it will run the risk of breeding cynical dispositions rather than nuanced understandings of media's central role in democracy.

Methods

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

1. How does media literacy education affect undergraduate university students' media comprehension, evaluation, and analysis skills?
2. How does media literacy education influence university students' understanding of the media's roles and responsibilities in a democratic society?

To explore these questions, the study utilized 239 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Maryland.[2] Of the 239 total participants, 170 were enrolled in Journalism 175: Media Literacy (J175) in the fall of 2006, a course offered through the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland and open to enrollment across the university. The students from J175 formed the experimental group. The remaining 69 participants, undergraduates from the University of Maryland's College of Education, formed the control group.

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, and analysis—across audio, video, and print formats.

Quasi-experiment[3]

The experimental design divided the 239 subjects into four groups. Five hypotheses measured differences in media skills attained. A media literacy skills assessment test[4] compared average test scores between the four groups to assess whether significant differences existed between (1) students who took the test before and after the course and (2) those did not take J175 or any similar courses. The four groups were as follows:

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 who were not enrolled in J175 (or any similar courses) but who did complete the skills assessment test.
2. *Pre-course* (n = 62).[5] These students were enrolled in J175 and completed the skills assessment test at the beginning of that course.

3. *Post-course* (n = 62). These are the same students who were in the *pre-course* group. They completed the skills assessment test at the beginning and end of the J175 course.
4. *Post-course only* (n = 108). These students were enrolled in J175 but took the skills assessment test only at the conclusion of the course.

The assessment test consisted of a television measure, a radio measure, and a print measure.[6] 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.

The second section of the survey consisted of seven open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were developed to measure 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?); and evaluation (what does this information suggest about the issue? how has this information changed what you believe about the issue?)

Students in the *pre-course* (also *post-course*) group were predominantly freshmen (56.5 percent), almost evenly divided in gender (53.2 percent women), and approximately half were white/Caucasian. The *post-course* only group, which took the skills assessment test only at the conclusion of the course, was comparable to the *pre-course/post-course* group, in that it also consisted of slightly more females (53.7 percent) and most of the students in the group were freshmen (39.8 percent) and sophomores (37 percent).

Measures

Open-ended question codes were developed exclusively by the researcher, based on a random sample of questionnaires selected from the study and past work in media education evaluation (see Worsnop 1997; Hobbs and Frost 2003; Arke 2005; Christ 2006). Extensive coding protocols were built for these questions, in the form of a five-point scale, and

advanced university students were trained as coders. Chronbach's (1951) alpha, an inter-rater reliability statistic also used by Hobbs and Frost (2003), is known to be highly reliable for experimental coder reliability. Chronbach's alphas range from .76 to .84 for the five open-ended questions coded for in this study. This is considered reliable for inter-coder reliability (Bland and Altman 1997) and established a means to continue the study with a confident level of accuracy.

T-tests were used to compare the average test scores of the participants and to analyze measures of covariance. Test scores were compared between the experimental group before and after, and against the control group. Because the groups were separate entities, the t-test was the strongest predictor for comparing distribution means in order to infer that the means of the corresponding populations also differed (George and Mallery 2003).

Educational outcomes in general are difficult to quantify, and measuring skills through quantitative testing is often limited. In this study, quantitative skills measurements were not used to elicit new and unique findings but to provide a baseline for subsequently asking students, who were by traditional means considered "media literate," about how they personally understand the connections between media, community, and democracy. While the quasi-experiment did reveal significant effects of the curriculum on students' critical media analysis skill levels, it did not address individual dispositions toward media. Focus groups were therefore added to provide such experiential reflection and to help overcome the limitations of measuring "effects" on students. Three focus groups were conducted: two sessions ($n = 10$, $n = 8$) were conducted with students from the J175 course, and a third focus group ($n = 9$) was conducted with students from the control group. The focus groups shared perspectives, views, attitudes, beliefs, responses, motivations, and perceptions (Litosseliti 2003) on media's role in society and their civic and democratic functions. Employing mixed methodologies allowed for inductive and deductive reasoning and assertions to be made about the results of the study with greater quality and scope (Creswell 2002; Sydenstricker-Neto 2007).

Experimental Group Findings: Students Reflect Skills Attainment

Hypothesis one tested whether, on average, the test scores of the *no-course* (control) group differed from the test scores of the *pre-course* experimental group. The presumption was that no statistical difference would be seen between the average test scores of the two groups. An independent samples t-test was run for each separate medium (TV, radio, print) and for the total score (also referred to as the *media literacy score*) of the three media combined.

The results strongly confirmed a baseline for comparison. The *no-course* group and the *pre-course* group, across all three media and in total, revealed no significant difference in average test scores. 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 two assumed a statistically significant relationship of average test scores would exist between the *pre-course* and the *post-course* groups. The hypothesis assumed that media literacy skills would be attained through the course curriculum. 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 ($M = 45.98$, $SD = 4.4$), $t(62) = -6.94$, at $p < .001$, 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 show that significant improvement was made in skill attainment between the beginning of the media literacy course and the end.[7]

Hypothesis three posited 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, not outlying factors such as memory recall and repetition, was the key for the increase in test scores. Once again, the comparison reinforced the effects of the media literacy curriculum. The *pre-test* group's ($M = 40.89$, $SD = 3.6$) average total media literacy test score was significantly lower than the *post-course only* group ($M = 44.96$, $SD = 4.5$), $t(108) = -6.193$, at $p < .001$. This result proves that the difference, across all media formats, was significant and not largely caused by externalities.

The fourth hypothesis stated that no significant difference would be found in the average test scores between the *post-course* group and the *post-course only* group. Although the *post-course* group with prior exposure to the test achieved a slightly better 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. 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. 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 a significant difference would be found in the average test scores of the *no-course* group and the *post-course only* group. The results here further 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.

Overall, the experimental results provide good evidence of the effectiveness of media literacy education in developing critical analysis skills. The results of the experiment successfully, and with no great surprise, 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 a larger question: does this skill attainment allow students to better understand the larger political, ideological, and democratic complexities of the media? Media-literate individuals should be capable of applying their newfound skills to understand and critically engage with media's larger social and civic responsibilities. As Livingstone (2004, p. 8) argues, "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."

Focus Group Findings: Students Express Considerable Negativity toward Media

> 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)

Numerous similarities and differences were noted between the two experimental focus group sessions and the control focus group session. Most important, and perhaps of most concern, were the consistently negative views toward media expressed by the experimental group students. These students, all of whom took J175, described 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 to adopt a highly defensive view, focused more on denouncing media functions than on critical reflection and discussion of why the media work as they do and to what end.

Why So Negative?

The negativity discovered in the experimental group discussions is cause for concern on numerous fronts. First, the general climate of cynicism was extensive. The negative tone of the conversations on media relevance and bias overshadowed any substantive discussions about relevance and credibility that may have evolved. One male student 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 comment, just one example of the general tone of the discussion, alludes to a lack of trust in media systems. One student echoed these statements: "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 were generally accepted in the discussion and reflect its general tone of distrust and suspicion.

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 defuse this comment, another student said, "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 is a natural and appropriate reflex in all people. However, in this specific case the cynical ideas expressed by the students were in direct response to media and their societal roles. What is the connection between any preexisting cynicism and the critical approach to media in a media literacy class? Perhaps media literacy education as it stands is inadequate to its goal of creating more aware *citizens*. The following quotations reflect the negativity pervasive in the experimental group discussions:

> All news is biased news.
> 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.
> I have this theory that the media is much more about money and control than anything.
> I think the government holds back a lot of information, because of fear of public reaction.
> I think the government has a foot in every major corporation out there. Media corporations.
> 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.

In general the conversations among the students who had followed the course 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: these students were quick to deride media at every possible point.

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 *cynical* to describe a healthy skepticism, mentioning that to be aware of media practices and to seek out inconsistencies in specific messages were his responsibility. This remark was made during a discussion about media credibility with students who claimed to have had no prior formal media education. Again, this statement can be seen as rather idealistic and somewhat unrealistic, but rarely were similar sentiments expressed in both experimental focus groups. The following quotations reflect the general tone of the control group discussions:

> 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.
> 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.
> 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.

More Skills, More Negativity: Why a Disconnect?

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 (global banking collapse, 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 to political coverage in general.

Second, the teaching of the J175 course could have had much to do with the negative outlook of the students in the experimental groups. Some students remarked that they were taught to be cynical, that they were shown only 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 educators typically advocate outcomes that reflect understanding and awareness, not negativity and cynicism. However, they rarely comment on how such broader outcomes might be attained. Rather, media educators assume that teaching students the skills to be critical will automatically lead to greater understanding and engagement with media. Without defining the experiential outcomes of media literacy, we run the risk of succeeding in teaching students to be critical without teaching them how to become engaged.

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"? One male student from the experimental group replied, "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."[8] This comment—and the broader findings of the study—raises disturbing questions about the social basis, and the political consequences, of students adopting such an apparently cynical stance.

New Directions for Postsecondary Media Literacy Education: Connecting Skills and Understanding

If media literacy outcomes are to be realized in higher education, the connections between critical media skills and an understanding of media's essential civic functions must be emphasized. Scholars (Heins and Cho 2003; Scharrer 2003; Hobbs 2004; Livingstone 2004; Kellner and Share 2005; Christ 2006) 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 few rigorous empirical investigations into media literacy education have taken place.

The following framework consists of a definition for postsecondary media literacy education, a model supporting the transfer from skill attainment to active citizenship, and suggestions for implementing this approach in the classroom. This framework is a recommendation, based on the results of this study, for media educators interested in integrating media literacy outcomes into their classrooms.

The Definition

Postsecondary 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 the importance of being a responsible, aware, and active participant in local, national, and global communities.

The Model

The model begins with critical skill attainment, which is a common goal of all media education. The model next addresses the transfer from skill attainment to qualitative learning outcomes. Media-literate students should *understand* the social influences of media, be *aware* of the democratic necessity of a media system, and feel *empowered* to be active civic participants. The results of the focus group discussions revealed a gap in the relationship between media skills and critical understanding of media's societal and democratic functions. This gap was filled largely with cynicism and negativity toward the media industry.
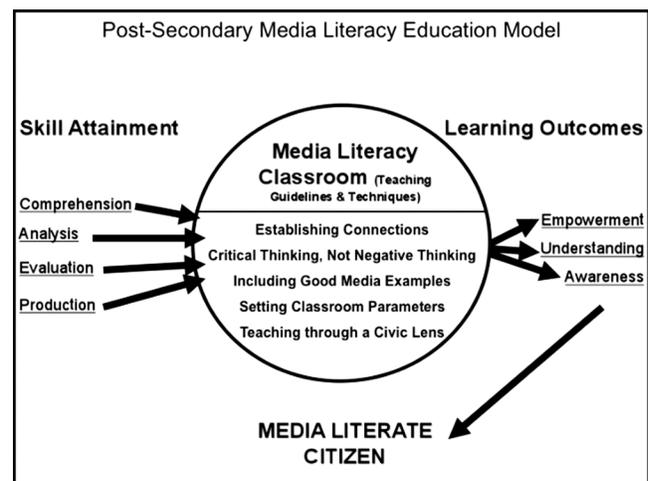

Figure 1. The Postsecondary Media Literacy Education Model attempts to elaborate on the classroom transfer from teaching critical media analysis skills to enabling media-literate outcomes.

Within the "media literacy classroom" circle are a series of guidelines for postsecondary media educators. Supported by the results of this study, the five guidelines presented below provide concrete classroom teaching techniques intended to cultivate the connections between analytical skills and broader media literacy outcomes.

The Suggestions

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 reflexive 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 fundamental relationship between media, democracy, and citizenship.

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 should 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 might influence their opinion on the issue? What is the evidence they are using to support their conclusions?

Media educators should also ask about alternative ways to inform the public about political candidates. 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.

2. Critical Thinking not Negative Thinking

Critical thinking is often advanced as the final outcome of media literacy education (Feuerstein 1999; Kellner and Share 2007; Leistyna and Alper 2007). Media educators must ensure that critical thinking is accompanied by an awareness of the necessity of media for engaged citizenship. Otherwise critical thought can quickly become cynical thought. Kellner and Share (2005) have developed an outline for what they call "critical media literacy" which

focuses on developing a set of critical skills in students that approach ideas of democracy. Carducci and Rhoads (2005) advocate the term *critical citizenship*, stating that "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; emphasis in original). Scharrer (2006, p. 71) reports on a study of sixth-grade students' "critical attitudes towards media violence," arguing that students would attain critical thinking skills by "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." The results of Scharrer's study suggested that after media literacy education students were more critically inclined to ask the "right" questions about why violence is shown on television. Her exploration is helpful and should be reinforced when attempting to highlight critical thinking as an outcome of media literacy.

3. Including Good 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." As evidenced in the results of this study, if students are sensitized only to negative media images and messages they may be more prone to blame media for societal shortcomings. Buckingham (2005) 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 opinion,

> tend to be driven by concerns about "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 underlying 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 tactically outsmart media. This, in turn, made them media literate. This mentality positions media as the main culprit for complex social issues and absolves individuals of responsibility in the media-public relationship.

Second, good media examples should come not only 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. Media educators should no longer critique only the large monoliths of the field to prove their points. Alternative media outlets need to be included in the discussion.

4. *Setting Parameters for the Classroom*

Setting parameters for the classroom can further reduce the complexities that emerge when trying to define media literacy outcomes. Clarifying the intentions of media inquiry throughout a class can help focus outcomes on goals such as active and engaged citizenship. Postsecondary media literacy parameters can be premised on two distinct educational attributes of media literacy:

1. A focus on skill attainment; specifically, media comprehension, evaluation, analysis, and production.
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 the civic outcomes associated with postsecondary media literacy. Such attributes are flexible. Media literacy's adoption into the university should be contingent not on following a set of rules but on assuring that a set of outcomes is reached.

5. *Teaching through a Civic Lens*

The university is the final stop for most in the formal educational process. Scholars (Levine 1996; Ehrlich 1999; Ehrlich 2000a; Kerr 2000; Barber 2002; Dunderstadt and Womack 2003; Kirp 2003; Newman, Couturier, and Scurry 2004) have written extensively about the role that higher education plays in preparing individuals for lives of civic responsibility. Civic education scholar

Thomas Ehrlich (2000b, p. 3) 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." If this were rewritten to include media in its duties and obligations to civil society, it would read as a manifesto for media literacy at the postsecondary level.

Figure 2 shows a continuum that reflects the civic progression of a university student. The continuum advocates awareness as the entry point of postsecondary media literacy education. Students at the undergraduate level are expected to begin active engagement and participation in civic issues. By enabling students to be better informed about the issues that influence them and their democracy, media literacy can use a civic lens to help students become aware of what the issues are, how they are portrayed, and what influence media have on their effectiveness.

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 enacting engagement and participation in democratic discourse.
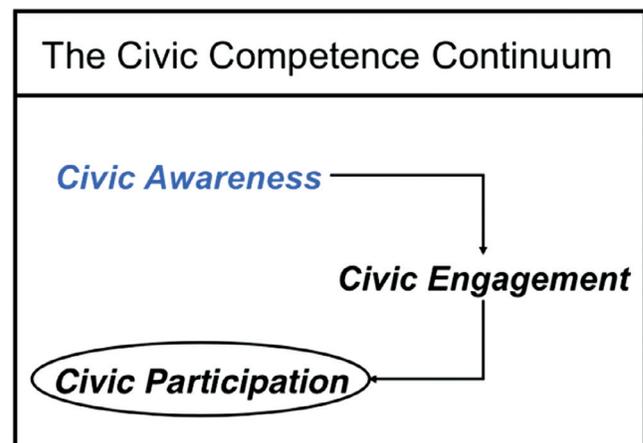

Figure 2. In this continuum, *awareness* refers to an understanding of how issues are shaped through media, *engagement* is the active pursuit of knowledge about the issues and understanding of the manner in which the issues are publicly portrayed, and *participation* is the action (e.g., voting, volunteering) that an individual takes in response to issues.

Discussion: Future Considerations for Postsecondary Media Literacy Education

The results of this study evoke numerous questions about the future of media education outcomes in the university. What should a media-literate student be like? What are the barriers to successful learning outcomes for postsecondary media education? How can media education teach active civic engagement in an information age?

More important, this study begs the question, 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 such as abortion, health care, or immigration? Do they understand what voting for a certain initiative means in light of how media outlets portray the issue?

The crux of postsecondary 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. Yet overseeing this transfer has never been a prerequisite for teaching or learning about media.

The study reported here has both practical and philosophical limitations: it concerns only one course, one curriculum, and a small number of instructors, who each brought a certain set of ideas, philosophies, and approaches into the classroom. The study is not representative of media literacy practices more broadly. However, inquiries like this have rarely been conducted in the past. More rigorous research, exploration, and empirical evaluation are needed. Rigorous inquiries into the effectiveness of media literacy can aid the development of coherent learning outcomes for the university (Christ 2006).

At the conclusion of a media literacy course, students should be able to critically analyze media. Yet they should also 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.

Appendix A: Experimental Design and Procedures

Students were exposed to one message (radio, TV, print) at a time. After the message was played, students were handed a survey questionnaire to complete. They were given approximately ten minutes to complete each questionnaire. This occurred for all three instruments. Each media message was approximately five minutes in duration. The entire session lasted approximately one hour.

The media messages were shown in random order for each experiment session. In one session, the participants might have taken the surveys in the order *radio, print, television*; in another session the order might have been *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.

The J175 course is randomly divided into eight discussion sections. On September 13 and 14, 2006, the media literacy skills assessment test was administered to four of the eight discussion sections. The students were provided consent forms and pretest 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. The total number of pretest experimental subjects was 62. On December 18, 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. On November 2, 20, and 21, 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.

Appendix B: Sample Media Literacy Skills Assessment Test

1. Please briefly summarize the message (use the who, what, when, where, why, and how structure to write about the message):
2. What is the purpose of the message? (check all that apply): ___to inform, ___to persuade, ___to entertain, ___self-expression, ___to teach, ___to make money.
3. Identify the sender of this message. Where did the information originate?
4. What information or points of view may be missing from this message?
5. 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.
6. What does this information suggest about the effectiveness of terrorist prevention in the United States?
7. How has this message changed what you believe about the way in which terrorism and safety are handled in the United States?

Notes

1. The term quasi-experiment is used here since this this study does not involve a truly *random* sample. As this research was conducted in a classroom setting, the participants in the study chose to enroll in the courses based on external factors. The term "quasi" has been used in past classroom-based research, and was used by Hobbs and Frost (2003) in their study on media literacy learning outcomes in high school.
2. Among the 239 students who participated in the experiment, 49.5 percent (119) were freshmen, 25.5 percent (61) sophomores, 18.4 percent (44) juniors, and 6.4 percent (15) seniors. The majority—97.5 percent (233)— were between 18 and 24 years old. The sample consisted of 146 females (61 percent) and 93 males (39 percent). Of these, 59 percent were white/Caucasian, 20 percent African American, 12 percent Asian, and 6 percent Latino. The remaining 3 percent of the sample reported their ethnicity as Native American, Pacific Islander, or Other.
3. See Appendix A for experimental design, overview, and procedures.
4. See Appendix B for sample Media Literacy Skills Assessment Test.
5. Groups 2 and 3 consisted of the same students. They completed the skills assessment test at the beginning and end of the semester.

6. The following three instruments were also chosen because they explored varying issues of national and global prominence: terrorism (television measure: October 6, 2004, *CBS Nightly News with Bob Schaeffer* story on New York City subway bomb threat); climate change (print measure: August 9, 2006, *Time Magazine* article, "Vail's Wind Ambition," by Clayton Neuman); and sexual behavior (radio measure: August 16, 2006, National Public Radio *News and Notes* story on sexual attitudes and music).
7. The outcome of hypothesis would have been weakened had the *pre-course* group, at the time of the December 2006 experiment infusion, simply remembered the skills assessment test to which they were exposed in September 2006. (The tests were identical.) Hypothesis three, however, proved that the curriculum, and not student recall, was the catalyst for increased skill attainment.
8. This is reminiscent 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 want 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, pp. 119–20).

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