Media Literacy in the Digital Age

Andrea MILLWOOD HARGRAVE

Most of us reading this article will have grown up with analogue media—what I will call “established media”—and we understand the conventions around it. We know that television broadcasting is linear—that is, a schedule is devised for and presented to us, the audience. The schedule is made up of programs, interstitial material and possibly advertising commercials. This is true whether the content is delivered via transmitters, via cable or by satellite direct to the home.

Further, broadcasting is regulated in most countries around the world, by either government departments or by independent statutory regulators, or even by self-regulatory processes. The scarcity of spectrum that defines analogue transmissions means that such regulation has been both necessary (to allow proper access to the public commodity of spectrum by those permitted—through license or otherwise—to use it) and possible. It has been relatively simple to regulate or monitor finite amounts of content delivered on a few, or even many, channels.

We have “grown up with” television. We understand its conventions of timing—in many countries of the world there is the notion of family viewing time (the watershed) whereby content transmitted up to that time might be thought of as suitable for children (although sometimes with parental supervision). In the UK the television watershed is at 9.00 P.M. and there is almost universal understanding of that concept and that time. That is not to say that material more suited to adult audiences may not be shown during the day—it might—but only when the likelihood of children being in the audience is low. Even then, care needs to be taken if preschool children are likely to be view-

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ing. At other times such as the weekend certain conventions must be adopted.\textsuperscript{1} While there is no watershed for radio in the UK, radio broadcasters are exhorted to pay “particular regard to times when children are particularly likely to be listening” such as breakfast time and during the times when they are normally being taken to school and may have access to the radio.\textsuperscript{2} Other countries such as Australia and Canada have similar restrictions.

There are other conventions too, which vary with the age of the audience and familiarity with the program genre. Children of quite a young age are able to distinguish between fact and fiction.\textsuperscript{3} Research finds young people, such as teenagers, are protective of those younger than themselves, seeking to restrict their viewing of images that might be upsetting. Audiences seem to understand well that a documentary will go into greater detail about, say, an item that has been in the news than the news item itself might. That, combined with the likely scheduling of the documentary program ensures that the audience knows it should expect material that may be more challenging than the news item might have been.

**Media Literacy: Relevance in a Digital World**

In the analogue world, then, media literacy is a kind of given. What digital media do is to extend and stretch the notion of media literacy because of the way that content delivered through analogue systems is expanded and stretched. We start then, with a brief look at the changes created by going digital:

- Linear transmission of programs within schedules is still possible, but not necessary, in a digital world. In an analogue world pay-per-view offered some freedom from the shackles of pre-organized programming. With digital delivery platforms, other than those that present themselves as linear channels, the freedom that had been offered by pay-per-view in the analogue world is multiplied. Television programs delivered on demand are increasing in reach, and much of the programming offered is delivered by the linear broadcast channels (so-called catch-up TV). In the digital age, programming is being watched on computer screens, programs are pulled down on PlayStation Portables (PSPs) and mobile phones, and the number of devices over which content may be offered is growing. The content may be catch-up TV or it might be programs taken off the shelf and transmitted

\textsuperscript{1} See Section 1.4 of the Ofcom Broadcasting Code: www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/ifi/codes/bcode/protectingu 18/.

\textsuperscript{2} See Section 1.5: www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/ifi/codes/bcode/protectingu 18/.

\textsuperscript{3} http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/assets/research/howchildreninter-
pret screenviolence.pdf.
via Internet protocol. Outside a linear world with its conventions of schedule, all these programs are delivered without the contextualization that linear transmissions offer.

- In some countries there are attempts to regulate content delivered through digital media, such as on-demand services. In Europe the Audiovisual Media Services Directive seeks to create a more “level” regulatory playing field with broadcasting. For the first time, video on-demand services are captured by the Directive, to be implemented on December 19, 2009 across Europe.\(^4\) However, the Directive talks of “graduated regulation” recognizing that “users have different degrees of choice and control over on-demand audiovisual media services.” The regulations applied to these services are not as strict as they are for broadcasting. In the UK the intention is that services delivered on demand, including those delivered via the Internet (IPTV), will be “captured” by the Directive as long as they fulfill certain criteria. These include an intention to be of general appeal, and intending to “inform, entertain and educate” with the editorial responsibility for the service falling within the purview of a media service provider. Other material that is not similar to television-like programming will not fall within the Directive’s remit and, in the UK at least, will remain outside statutory regulation.

- Where statutory regulation is not possible, many countries are looking to developing self- and/or co-regulatory systems to regulate the industry. In the UK self-regulation has proved especially successful in the newest of the markets with the industry developing Codes of Practice for social networking sites\(^5\) and content delivered via mobile technologies.\(^6\) These Codes of Practice alone, however, are not sufficient to ensure safe and appropriate use (or reception) of media content. This paper will argue that media literacy, too, must play a role.

- This leads to the “conventions” attached to new forms of digital media content. If timing was an indicator of the likely content of material in an analogue or digital linear world, on-demand television makes that redundant (although some on-demand services in the UK still broadly follow scheduling conventions).

- Importantly analogue television—and broadcasting by its nature—is not interactive whereas the new media technologies allow great interactivity.

Those who were consumers, the audience, now can create content and can control how and when it is received or used. This is quite a different scenario from that offered by analogue broadcasting and the conventions surrounding it are developing all the while. They have little time to become established before the technology allows a new form of use to add to or overtake the last usage. With this move towards interactivity and the ability to manipulate content has come user or consumer activism, with groups sharing information and able, for example, to campaign against unfair business practices.

The learning process is truncated, and the balance to be struck between maintaining established standards and allowing for change is a difficult one. Certainly, the popular media contain many scare stories about the inappropriate use of new media forms. This is one of the concerns that is well expressed by the Council of Europe which notes “the new technological dimension in information and data exchanges does not alter the established standards of freedom of expression and information, which also include proportional legal restrictions necessary in a democratic society for the protection of minors.”

While many of the concerns are about minors, the new digital communications landscape extends to all users, regardless of age.

The importance of media literacy is underlined by the recognition that the new economies will be dominated by digital technologies and the human ability to use these technologies for social, cultural and economic advantage. In 2000 Europe recognized, in the Lisbon Agenda, that if Europe were to compete internationally in economic terms it would have to accept, promote and be part of “the knowledge economy.” This required the development of different competencies among the population with skills to be changed from those involved for example, in manufacturing to those involved with ICT and other technologies.

The *Digital Britain Report* published in 2009 emphasized this, saying that “on current definitions the Digital Britain sectors account for nearly £1 in every £10 that the whole economy produces each year.” The report goes on to note:

The global scale of the digital communications sector is aptly illustrated by the ranking of the sector among global brands: six of the top 10 global brands by value this year are in the digital sector, one Chinese, one British

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7 The promotion of Internet and online media services appropriate for minors; Recommendation 1882 (2009) [http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta09/EREC1882.htm](http://assembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta09/EREC1882.htm).

and four American. That scale and importance is reflected in the focus that governments are giving to it: Australia is creating an entirely new nationwide high-speed communications network. Other countries around the Pacific Rim from Japan and Korea to Singapore and New Zealand are all adopting next generation networks. High speed broadband and smart-grid technology formed an important part of the USA administration’s recent stimulus program.

The new forms of technology that deliver digital content—be it entertainment or for commerce or for socio-cultural reasons—are crucial now to the way in which our societies are expected to develop. And an understanding by consumers and citizens of the ways in which both the technologies can be harnessed and the content used is also vital to the safe and efficient functioning of these same societies.

Media Literacy: Meaning and Relevance

All articles about media literacy begin with a definition of the term. It is a source of some amusement (or mockery) for those who do not work in the field that those of us who claim to be involved in media literacy cannot offer one simple definition. But of course this attempt or struggle towards a definition is symptomatic of where we find ourselves when we think of “media literacy in a digital age.” The environment is dynamic and, this essay argues, the precise elements of the definition change with the environment created by shifting technologies and the developing uses found for these technologies—many of which are not predicted or predictable.

But for the fact that the term media literacy has passed into popular parlance—it is a misnomer. We should, rather, speak of communications literacy and even digital communications literacy to better articulate the changes and evolution within the communications environment that are occurring.

Below is a table from a study commissioned to the Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona by the European Commission in 2007. In its analysis of the history of media literacy the authors state that “Media literacy, meanwhile, is a part of the important process of humanity’s communicative development, which started with the introduction of the classical written alphabet, and which has extended to the development of electronic media and digitalised information.” And that process continues. The figure describes the environment of each communication “era” according to the skills required to access

The media of that time and the social-cultural outcomes of each period. It is a useful summary of how literacy has had to develop.

The same study develops a further distinction between the electronic media of mass communication, what is called the analogue age for the purposes of this article, and the digital media or multimedia communication. The study argues that in mass communication the different media are distinct, one from the other, and there is little intersection of content (it suggests that film has crossed into television but the integrity of the film remains distinct from other programming made for television). However, media in the digital age, can interact, intersect, and cross-over. Technological advances now make it possible to receive programming through a variety of media delivery devices. And the possibilities of these technological devices have led the user to be, if so desired, the creator of content. That content can also be shared across different delivery platforms. Social networking sites or user generated content are becoming part not only of informal content delivery structures, but are also being used within formal media. The use of video footage captured on a

**Figure 1. The Evolution of Media Literacy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical era</th>
<th>Communicative environment</th>
<th>New skills</th>
<th>Socio-cultural outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classical era</td>
<td>Oral and gestural communication + Development of alphabetical writing</td>
<td>Command of oral and gestural language + Alphabetical skills</td>
<td>+ Systematization and conservation of knowledge + Origin of philosophy and scientific exploration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renaissance-and first industrial revolution</td>
<td>+ Development of printing, of books and the press</td>
<td>+ Amplification and expansion of literacy</td>
<td>+ Advances in empirical philological sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second industrial revolution</td>
<td>+ Appearance of electronic media: telephone, film, radio and television</td>
<td>+ Audiovisual literacy</td>
<td>+ Media and consumer societies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information society</td>
<td>+ Digital media and Internet + Media literacy (in a climate of media convergence)</td>
<td>+ Digital literacy</td>
<td>+ Globalization of information + Explosion of knowledge + Knowledge society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The + signs indicate innovations introduced during the corresponding period.

mobile telephone is often seen now as part of “professionally produced” news programming. This is not entirely new, of course; the home video show format of calamities has been a popular part of television programming for decades. But it was limited in its versatility of delivery and was not potentially instantaneous as content now can be, transmitted from the mobile telephone to the Internet.

Importantly, the two types of communication—mass media and multimedia—still sit side by side. While audiences for television broadcasting are fragmenting, they still remain significant in size and importance. For the purposes of this article, therefore, it is important to remember that definitions of media literacy (or communications literacy) are still appropriate for an analogue world as well as for the evolving digital environment.

While there is no standard or single definition of media literacy, there are some common principles shared by the definitions. The European Commission (made up of the 27 countries of Europe) offers one definition:

Media literacy relates to the ability to access the media, to understand and critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media content and to create communications in a variety of contexts.\(^\text{10}\)

Ofcom, the regulator for both telecommunications and broadcasting in the UK, which has the promotion of media literacy as part of its remit, defined media literacy in similar terms in 2004, “the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts.”

There are other forms of literacy that touch on communications literacy and may be thought of as a subset. These include computer literacy, based on the binary nature of signals being transmitted, and information literacy, which is generally thought of as the capacity to evaluate information, no matter where it comes from.

Ofcom, with the Department for Children, Schools and Families, commissioned an audit of the competencies demanded by the various definitions of media literacy. The audit found overlaps and common characteristics between the elements of the various definitions, as well as differences, shown in the table below.\(^\text{11}\)

Digital communications literacy then would encompass all these things, and a communications literate person would have these capacities.


\(^{11}\) http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/ml_policy_development/.
• The ability to physically access content through different delivery platforms; this requires an ability to manipulate those platforms where content might be found (the television, the mobile telephone, the computer)
• To understand what it is one is seeking, how to request it and what it is one is receiving
• To evaluate critically the value or veracity of the content being received—particularly important in an informational context
• To create content or communications, be it through email or through audio-visual images
• To do all these things through the delivery platforms that are available and appropriate.

The European Commission (charged with developing a single market in Europe), declared in 2007:

The aim of media literacy is to increase awareness of the many forms of media messages encountered in our everyday lives. It should help citizens recognise how the media filter their perceptions and beliefs, shape popular culture and influence personal choices. It should empower them with critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills to make them judicious consumers and producers of information. Media education is part of the basic entitlement of every citizen, in every country in the world, to freedom of expression and the right to information and it is instrumental in building and sustaining democracy.12

Figure 2. Mapping Competencies across Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main competence groups</th>
<th>Ofcom media literacy</th>
<th>CILIP* information literacy</th>
<th>Charter for Media Literacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td></td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining the need</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating information**</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation</td>
<td></td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CILIP = Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals

**Communicating information is one aspect of creativity in Ofcom’s specification of media literacy.

Source: Ofcom 2009.

Regardless then, of the precise definition of communications literacy, this author argues that the development of the skills that lead to such literacy is integral to the effective and appropriate use of emerging and extant delivery platforms for content. Indeed, it is argued, the greater the development of these skills, the better it will be for the individual and for society as the opportunities offered through these digital means can be properly exploited to their full advantage and for the benefit of all. It is also argued that the definition, by the very nature of the environment it is in, is dynamic and offers a framework within which to work rather than being limited to a precise set of variables. What can be defined is a desired outcome: the literate consumer and citizen in a world where digital communications exist.

**Distinctions in the Definition of Media Literacy**

The European Commission commissioned a study, coordinated by the European Association for Viewers’ Interests (EAVI) with the support of a number of academic institutions in Europe,\(^\text{13}\) to look at how one might assess the levels of media literacy in a country.\(^\text{14}\) The purpose of this study was initially to develop a common definition of media literacy and then to set a baseline against which media literacy might be assessed across a population. That is, the study is not a study of individuals nor is it a study of any one country; all 27 European countries were assessed against common criteria.

Realizing that seeking a common agreed-upon definition for all countries was not an efficient use of time (no one definition is ever agreed upon, as noted above), the Consortium turned its attention to examining the component parts that are common to definitions of media literacy and to look at the connections between them. That is, to examine the variables that define a media literate person and how the elements work, one with the other and across the whole, to reach a possible consensus of the level of media literacy within a nation. As already stated, this is an important outcome if the objectives set by the Lisbon Agenda for a single market operating effectively in the knowledge economy are to be met.

Importantly, the study did not rely only on academic research but, recognizing the requirement to consider media literacy in the context of a single European market, collected data from civil society organizations, regulators and the media industry itself.

\(^\text{13}\) CLEMI (Centre de liaison de l’enseignement et des médias d’information), Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona, Université Catholique de Louvain, University of Tampere.

\(^\text{14}\) http://ec.europa.eu/avpolicy/media_literacy/docs/studies/eavi_assessment_criteria_ml_levels_europe.pdf.
To begin with, a “conceptual map” of media literacy was developed which identified various possible components of media literacy and looked at how they related to each other. The importance of this map lies in the fact that it is not country- or time-specific and can be used to monitor and evaluate change as well as allowing a snapshot of media literacy levels at a particular point in time.

Where possible quantifiable indicators were sought—data sets that covered as many of the 27 EU countries as possible and which could (ideally) be tracked over time. The data sets themselves were found to concentrate on usage and, as already described, media or communications literacy goes beyond usage. Data on more qualitative indicators, such as the aspect of creation, were not generally found across the EU spectrum. Nevertheless, the study did find examples of such questions that could be developed in subsequent cross-European surveys.

Once the map had been developed, the study divided the concept of media literacy into two broad areas: those that looked at individual competences and those that considered the environmental factors surrounding that individual. Each of these is described in detail below. However, in summary:

Individual competences are those relating to:
- use (technical abilities)
- critical understanding
- communication abilities.

Environmental factors are those relating to:
- availability (of the technologies)
- media education and other learning environments
- regulatory, industry and civil society initiatives.

Individual Competences
It must be remembered that although these data are called individual competences they are not a measure of any one individual but are an amalgam of the skills of a population of respondents. As Figure 3 below shows, individual competences are divided into two sets: personal competences and social competences. Personal competences are further subdivided into (a) technical skills and (b) critical understanding. Social competences are those demonstrating the ability to communicate. The figure shows some of the questions or indicators that were used to develop measures of these competences.
Figure 3. Dimension 1: Individual Competences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Use Skills (technical) | Computer and Internet Skills | • Computer skills  
• Internet skills |
| | Balanced and Active Use of Media | • Internet use  
• Newspaper circulation  
• Going to the cinema  
• Reading books  
• Mobile phone subscriptions |
| | Advanced Internet Use | • Buying by Internet  
• Reading news by Internet  
• Internet banking |
| | Understanding Media Content and its Functioning | • Reading text  
• Classifying written and audiovisual texts  
• Distinguishing media content  
• Elements to which the user attaches importance to rely on the information  
• Classifying websites  
• Classifying media platforms and interaction systems |
| | Critical Understanding Competences | • Media concentration  
• Knowledge and opinion regarding the media regulation subject  
• Do you know which institution sanctions possible violations of the law operated by TV stations?  
• Do you know the authorized institution to turn to when you noticed something insulting, injurious or offending on TV, radio or internet? If the answer is yes, name it  
• Rules and rights applicable to media content  
• Perceptions of the watershed  
• Knowledge about regulation on Internet  
• Author/Use right  
• Exploring information and critical search of information  
• Checks made when visiting new websites  
• Judgments made about a website before centering personal details |
| | Knowledge about media and media regulation | • User-created content in the EU  
• Creating a profile or sending a message in a social networking website |
| | User Behavior | • Internet for cooperation  
• “User centricity” on online public services  
• Citizen participation activities ever done  
• E-government usage by individuals |
| | Social Relations | • Media production skills  
• Experience of creativity  
• User created content |
| | Communicative Abilities | |
(a) Use skills (Personal competences)
These are the skills required to access, operate and physically use the media delivery tools and the media themselves effectively. They are a necessary condition for media literacy and, at the most basic, would include knowing how to switch on a computer (an oft-reported jest to show a lack of understanding of computer technologies). Use skills, however, go beyond a basic knowledge of how computers, the television, or a mobile telephone can be operated. In this study, other skills related to a diversity of media such as reading or levels of Internet use or even immersion in other audiovisual media such as the cinema were to be considered. This is because the use of a variety of media shows both the availability of such media to a population and the inquisitiveness of the population where they are available.

This variable is extended, however, beyond the technical skills required for any actual engagement with and use of the media, and beyond media availability, to include the use of tools to exploit and use the medium to its fullest. It also allows the individual the ability to use the knowledge gained in one medium and refer it across to another. So the use of a contact book (address list) on a computer can be transferred onto the contacts list of a smart phone and the smart phone can be used to conduct many of the (basic) functions of a number of media platforms.

The EAVI study summarizes the criteria for measuring technical skills. These are:

- Understanding simple technical functions
- Understanding complex technical functions
- Critical awareness of technical issues (what is and is not possible on that delivery medium)
- Decoding interfaces (that is the ability to understand and decipher the essential elements of the interface between functions)
- Adapting and personalizing interfaces
- Ability to search and choose technical information, devices and configurations
- Ability to convert informal procedural knowledge into deductive, formal and declarative knowledge (that is, the ability of the individual to share this technical knowledge. This is very important in increasing the technical abilities of both the self and others and interacts with the more informal learning environments that help shape media literacy).

It may be argued that the technical skills subset might overlap with the more qualitative subset of critical understanding in general. This article argues they should be kept separate—technical skills and understanding are based on a knowledge and comprehension of the physical capabilities of the
medium being used. Thus, in broadcasting, the individual knows how to turn on the television and how to tune the receiver to capture the content desired as well as how to use the interactive functions. In a mobile world, the user will know how to set the computer to watch catch-up programs on a mobile broadband connection and tune in to view that program, for example, on a mobile medium while riding the train. This is quite different from an understanding that the program viewed on a train is a news program rather than a piece of dramatic fiction.

(b) Critical understanding (Personal competences)

Often when one speaks of a person being media literate it is their ability to understand or decode the information that is being offered to them, that is being referred to. The study delineated three components that make up the critical understanding subset within media literacy. These are:

(i) Understanding media content and function

This is the core of the popular definition of “media literacy.” It is the ability of the individual to make sense of or decode the media messages they are receiving and refers to audiovisual, aural or text-based media. Crucially this ability allows the individual to distinguish between fact and fiction or, for example, between news and documentary. However this form of media literacy requires an understanding of the conventions of the medium used and, as already suggested, these may be less apparent and less easily defined than was possible in a time of analogue and linear content delivery. In the analogue world of broadcasting, program schedules offered a range of content designed to draw audiences through the schedule. They may have applied conventions of timing to exclude, or at least forewarn, audiences of material that might have been thought of as inappropriate (such as unsuitable for children because of the matters they dealt with).

In the digital communications world, these conventions have been largely shattered. Linear broadcasting remains strong in terms of audience appeal but many other platforms offer the same content, not restricted by timing conventions or pre-transmission information or even knowledge of the genre. This is especially true of content seen on platforms such as YouTube or Hulu. In terms of news and informational content delivery, the plethora of media offering information—from established broadcasting brands to blogs to Twitter—means that it is ever more difficult for, and incumbent on, the individual to sort fact from fiction and truth from opinion.
Similar analyses must be undertaken by the individual for other types of interactive information decoding. A consumer must be able to distinguish advertising from consumer information, and be able to evaluate information in order to make purchases effectively and without detriment to the consumer.

The study suggests that the following are components of this ability to understand both media content and function:

- Coding and decoding, as described above
- Critical evaluation and comparison
- Seeking out information, an active process
- Summarizing and synthesizing information

The study also suggests that the final component here requires an ability to remix and recycle media content. That is an ability to redefine information or content to serve another purpose such as completing an online purchase.

(ii) Knowledge of media and media regulation

This dimension of critical understanding requires an ability to understand the factors that surround the various media delivery platforms and to be able to use one’s critical skills in setting the context within which these operate.

In the UK, broadcasting organizations are subject to statutory regulation with clearly delineated rules and guidelines. This is because of the long-established consideration that broadcasting is a high-impact medium. Premium rate services on mobile telephones on the other hand are subject to a co-regulatory regime. Social networking sites are subject to a self-regulatory system. Each of these content delivery systems operates under a different regulatory structure with different levels of guidance, rules and regulations. Indeed, in the UK internet-delivered content is subject to the general laws of the land but is otherwise not regulated currently. This will change with the advent of the AudioVisual Media Services Directive, which will bring within a co-regulatory regime television-like programming offered through on-demand services, including such services offered online or via Internet Protocol.15

What is interesting as one moves to a less rigid framework of regulation, defined by fewer obligations upon the delivery platforms and (possibly) content providers, is whether the individual user of the medium or

media is able to keep up with or be aware of these changes and nuances between media. Do audiences or users expect similar conventions (or restrictions) to be applied to all media platforms and all similar types of content? This is not the way in which regulatory practice is being developed and there is a need for the individual to understand these variables.

(iii) User behavior
The final principal component of critical understanding is user behavior which is a dependent variable, reliant on both media understanding and function. It is the way in which interaction is maintained and the way in which the other skills and variables are refined and distributed as output. User behavior therefore should be seen as a way of internalizing and personalizing the learning from the other competences. User behavior includes content creation and, as such, this author suggests, is critical in the consideration of the newest of the media content platforms available currently, such as social networking sites, where conventions are not yet established and the consequences of usage of these platforms little understood.

(c) Communicative abilities (Social competences)
The above described the personal competence skill sets. Closely related to user behavior are the communicative abilities of the individual or social competences. These are the ability to use the variety of available media delivery platforms and to use and exploit the content creation capacities to communicate and interact with the object served by medium (such as in e-government) and, most importantly, with other people (such as in social networking). To reflect this range of abilities this variable is further divided into three subsets:

(i) Social relations
The mobile telephone was the first to extend communication from face to face and voice-related content to other forms of interaction through the use of text messaging (SMS). This has perhaps been one of the most extraordinary uses made of technology in modern times and text-based communication across a range of media is now common as a method to communicate between people but also a means to present information (as with Twitter).

The other, later extension to social relations offered by the more recently established media is mostly based around media that are delivered via Internet Protocol such as the avatar-related interactive sites (such as “Second Life” or the Japanese “Meet Me”) or social networking
sites (such as Mixi or Facebook). However, the conventions that might be applied to these newer forms of social relations are not well known or established. This leads to concerns among policy makers (and others such as parents) about the use of these newer media forms. There is significant evidence for example, that although children and young people know of the (informal) codes of practice they should follow when using social networking sites, they do not always exercise them and allow contact by strangers and others, unvetted, that they have added to their ‘friends’ list.16

The aspect of “social relations” then is an important factor in any consideration of the ability to develop communications literacy in the population, especially among younger groups of users.

(ii) Participation in the public sphere

Concepts such as e-government are increasingly used as a means of communicating and interacting with citizens. However there is another aspect of such participation which has had a more profound impact on users of digital communications and that is the participation permitted within society.

The Gruenwald Declaration was the result of an International Symposium on Media Education organized by UNESCO in 1982 that underlined the importance of the media and communications in civic development. It states:

The role of communication and media in the process of development should not be underestimated, nor the function of the media as instruments for the citizen’s active participation in society. Political and educational systems need to recognize their obligations to promote in their citizens a critical understanding of the phenomena of communication.17

The EAVI study points to four types of skills that might be included in this type of civic participation—these can be thought of as part of the requirements for a truly media literate person:

• Maintaining participation with a group with common values
• Using social media to manage contacts and achieve common strategies

16 Andrea Millwood Hargrave and Sonia Livingstone, Harm and Offence in Media Content: A Review of the Evidence (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2009).
17 http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/MEDIA_E.PDF.
Figure 4. Dimension 2: Environmental Factors

- **Criteria**: Media Literacy Context
  - **Components**: Media Education, Media Literacy Policy, Media Industry, Civil Society
  - **Indicators**:
    - Media Education: ML presence in the curriculum, ML teachers training, ML educational activities, ML didactic resources
    - Media Literacy Policy: Existence of regulatory authorities, Importance of the authorities legal mission, Activities of regulators on media literacy
    - Media Industry: Newspapers, Television channels, Cinema festivals, Telephone companies, Internet providers, Other organizations
    - Civil Society: Organizations which are active in ML, Activities of ML developed by civil associations, Coordination/cooperation between civil associations

Media Availability:
- Mobile Phone: Mobile phones per 100 inhabitants
- Internet: Broadband penetration rate
- Television: Population and household equipment
- Radio: Radio sets per 1000 inhabitants
- Newspapers: Newspapers circulation
- Cinema: Screens per country

• Interaction with social institutions such as political parties or other civil society organizations
• Appropriate presentations of identity, including the ability to create avatars.

(iii) Content creation

Overlapping with the last of the skills mentioned above—the ability to create different forms of identity—are other forms of content creation. These range from the most simple such as those taught in schools as part of ICT education (the ability to use the computer to write text, undertake basic mathematical tasks, develop presentations) to those that create audiovisual content and are able to reach to audiences through it. Nico Nico Douga or YouTube can show straightforward videos or edited video or even professionally produced content, all user generated.

There is also content creation requiring what the EAVI study calls “participative skills” where interaction with others is required to complete the creation process. So links with other groups, sharing tools and knowledge or collaborating on a piece of content not hampered by geography are all skills made possible by the digital communications environment.

These are elements of media or communications literacy that relate to the environment in which the individual is placed. As Figure 4 shows, taken from the EAVI study, there are a number of components that fall within this group of factors.

Most of these environmental factors relate to the policies adopted in a country and, because they allow access or exposure to the digital communications environment, are important for the desired progress to a digital economy. They cover formal policies such as media education with curricula that develop media literacy across the formal learning environment, especially at primary and secondary levels. The reader might note that the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Media Literacy Education clearinghouse offers information about resources relevant to media literacy education.18

The policy variable also covers informal policies within a media literacy context such as those developed by communications regulators. Foremost among the regulators has been the UK regulator,19 Ofcom, which has undertaken substantial and wide-ranging research to understand the range of skills

19 http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/medlitpub/medlitpubrss/.
required to be a media literate person, looking across demographic groups. Ofcom has also been instrumental in many campaigns and initiatives to increase awareness of digital communications, working with other NGOs and interested parties on events such as Silver Surfers Day—an initiative to get older people involved with the opportunities offered by the Internet. Indeed, many of these initiatives look for ways in which to engage people who would otherwise be excluded from the digital world (through age, disability, unemployment and so on). The Australian regulator, the Australian Communications and Media Authority, is also much involved in media literacy research and supports many initiatives to help increase the digital literacy of its population across all social groupings.

The media industry is also heavily involved in many of these initiatives in the UK. The public service broadcaster, the BBC, recently launched a website that is designed to address key skills such as critical evaluation by asking questions of the user about their own behavior and attitudes. The challenge for all these initiatives is to draw people in and to ensure that those who might be excluded or disadvantaged in some way can reach out to these facilities. The positive for the BBC site is that it has high brand recognition and uses its own content packaged and divided into segments to attract the user. The segments fall into three areas: Use, Understand, Create. Again a very similar, if broad, set of criteria for defining media literacy.

In many countries, and the UK is but one example, media literacy initiatives are understood and seen as important by many civil society organizations. They may range from lobby groups (such as those involved with disability or ageism) or they may be consumer and citizen groups, arguing for greater civil society participation, especially in decisions about the way in which digital content can be accessed.

Finally as the figure above shows, access to these delivery platforms is essential to create the totality of literacy that we have been discussing in this article. It is for this reason that the Digital Britain Report suggests a move away from concentrating on media literacy alone to a more focused consideration of digital participation and inclusion. While this author agrees that availability and access are key foundations to build media literacy, she warns against losing sight of the qualitative aspects that communications literacy encompasses such as creativity and the ability to evaluate content critically.

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20 http://www.ofcom.org.uk/media/features/surfersday.
21 http://www.bbc.co.uk/medialiteracy/.
CONCLUSION

Very often, where communications literacy is discussed, it comes from what these authors from New Zealand have called “a deficit viewpoint—the need for protection.” That is protection from unsuitable or inappropriate material, especially protection of the young. The digital media delivery platforms with their ability to make content more easily accessible (than in an analogue linear world) increase that fear. This then, is one driver for the requirement for communications literacy.

To this should be added the economic compulsion that is driving governments and policy makers. There is increasingly an understanding among policy makers that users (or consumers) of digital technologies and content are developing in power and sophistication, and their ability to make demands of governments and policy makers is growing commensurately.

Policy makers recognize that media literacy and the ability to use and manipulate the digital media are important for the economic success of a nation. So there are many strategies that now seek to close what has been called the digital divide where groups within society are disadvantaged by their lack of access to digital communications technologies. Alongside this is a drive in many countries to provide everyone with broadband internet access and many “stimulus packages” are being put in place to drive such penetration (the UK, USA and Australia have all committed significant amounts of taxpayers’ money to such strategies). In Europe, the European Commission has its “i2010” initiative set aside one billion Euros to help rural areas get online.

Alongside these concerns about access to inappropriate material by young people or the desire for economic strength comes continuing uncertainty about the role of regulation. In the UK (for example), you can watch a television program on a broadcast or cable-delivered service and it will be subject to regulation. Watch that same program via the Internet and it will be more lightly regulated than broadcast television if the program service on which it is to be seen falls within the criteria defined by the aforementioned Audio Visual Media Services Directive. Watch it on YouTube and it will be entirely unregulated (although self-regulation is apparent on many of the user generated sites with people voting off certain clips or programs if they are thought distasteful).

It is largely agreed by policy makers and stakeholders that creating a more communications or media literate population will offer a balance between draconian statutory regulation (that will be circumvented) and no regulation (which runs too many risks, including not just a risk to society but also of creating bad press for politicians and policy makers). A communications literate population is one in which users and audiences can take more responsibility, with more knowledge, for controlling what they and their families watch. So alongside increasing the individual competences as described in some detail above, the environmental factors also need to operate well and industry and policy makers need to work together to ensure that people understand the point at which the conventions they might have relied on in an analogue world are no longer relevant.

NHK BROADCASTING STUDIES 2010 No.8