The Importance of Media Literacy

The Importance of Media Literacy:

Getting the Most from the Digital World

Edited by

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PREFACE

Many people are worried about how to reduce the negative impacts of media on children and teens. Media literacy programs have been shown to be effective in helping youth think critically about their own media use. With new technology being released every day, the need for media literacy has never been greater. However, media literacy programs in schools and online tend to be hit and miss, and many people don't know where to turn to get the best information.

This book is perfect for parents, practitioners, researchers, and educators, to help them understand the digital landscape and how to best help children and teens thrive. The chapters are written by leading scholars in the field, and provide up-to-date information on what young people are facing, and how to help them understand their media world.

- Sarah Coyne
Brigham Young University

DEDICATIONS

Media consumption and production have been significant parts of my life for as long as I can remember. It is in no doubt, then, that I recognize that I have been affected by the media in some way for the majority of my life. With that in mind, I also recognize just how important it is to critically analyze the media content we consume, as well as take part in producing, in order to be healthy and responsible human beings and citizens of the world. Therefore, I am incredibly honored to serve as a co-author of a chapter in this book, in addition to serving as a co-editor. I am indebted to my fellow co-editors whom I have had the privilege to work with on several projects all aimed at establishing the importance of, and the need for, media literacy for a wide variety of audiences. We are all indebted to the authors of the important chapters contained within this book, and we are honored to share their insights with a broader audience.

In addition, I owe an immeasurable amount of gratitude to my mother, Marilyn Hopper. From her earliest warnings of "Megan, Megan, scoot back. Radiation, zap, zap!" urging me as a toddler to sit further back from the television set in our living room, to our most recent insightful and cherished discussions about media bias. She has always instilled in me the need to be informed, and the most valuable lessons about being a critical consumer of the media and how to exert an appropriate amount of scepticism towards media messages. Discussing media content with her is one of the greatest joys of my life, and keeps me pushing to be, and to do, better as a teacher and scholar.

- K. Megan Hopper

Growing up, I loved watching movies with my mother and listening to my favorite songs with friends. Fast forward, and as I pursued my doctorate degree in developmental psychology, I became interested in the impact media can have on development and behavior, both as a mother and as a psychologist. Since then, my passion has been studying media effects, particularly popular music and social media. I am honored to co-edit this text with wonderful colleagues I have 'met' over the years, in addition to the numerous projects we have worked on. Working with such a dedicated and devoted group of researchers is an honor in itself. It has also been an honor to work with the authors of the chapters of this text and see the passion for media effects research in all aspects of psychology.

I would also like to dedicate my work to the most important people in my life: my husband and children. You are truly the light of my life! I also dedicate my work to my parents (Demetria Smith and Steven Wright) and to the loving memory of my grandparents, Ethel and Clayton Wright.

- Chrysalis L. Wright

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CHAPTER 1

MEDIA LITERACY IN THE UNITED STATES

LESLEY-ANNE EY

The Role of Media

With the omnipresent media infiltrating our lives, we must understand the purpose, meaning, and influence of modern media in order to effectively navigate it and consume it in a way that maximizes the benefits and minimizes the harm. Mass media, in the form of written media, film, radio, and digital platforms serves many functions. It provides the population with information: news, weather, events, new science, and local and world affairs. The internet can provide educational materials at the click of a button. Social media allows for the development and maintenance of relationships and helps us to coordinate social activities. Digital media allows us to organize our lives using apps to book appointments or flights, do banking, shop, or download maps. It also serves as a form of entertainment where we can download music, films, and games (*Media Sociology - the role of media in influencing people*, 2015). Through mass media, we are always connected.

The Use of Media

Globally, consumers spend, on average, over seven and a half hours each day engaging with the media. However, consumers in the United States spend more time interacting with media than in other countries (Statista, 2021). In 2021, Americans spent approximately five and a half hours per day engaging with traditional media (e.g., television, print, and radio) and eight hours and five minutes per day interacting with digital media, such as social media, gaming, and streaming movies (Oberlo, 2022). Research by Oberlo (2022) found a consistent trend over the past five years for American consumers to engage more with digital media and less with traditional media. They forecast that this trend will continue. This may be because

approximately 85.5% of American households have internet subscriptions, and 99% of Americans aged 18-29 years have access to the internet (Statista, 2021). There are similar trends in other countries. For example, in Australia, engagement in digital services, such as online subscription services, streaming, and apps, has overtaken commercial free-to-air television since 2020. Approximately one in three consumers watch online subscription services for about six hours a week, as opposed to one in four watching free-to-air television (Rapsey, 2022). Australians spend on average six hours and thirteen minutes a day on the internet, with many engaging with the it for entertainment purposes, shopping, and accessing news (Social Media Perth, 2022).

Concerns About Media Access

Access to mass media provides an incalculable convenience to the everyday lives of consumers and the benefits of media are many. However, such access can also place consumers at risk. With the increasing time spent online, internet users are becoming concerned about the effects on their wellbeing, as well as online privacy (Social Media Perth, 2022). Concerns about usage include understanding cookies and how companies collect and use personal data, identifying what is real or fake on the internet, tracking screen time, media usage, security of passwords, and banking details (Social Media Perth, 2022).

Algorithms and Artificial Intelligences

Algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) are used to collect data on individual consumers' online activity by structuring and filtering information in the media environment. Algorithms and AI tools monitor users in real-time, often calculating potential vulnerabilities and then using collected data to market products, align content with an individual's interest, or simply keep users on the screen. They are also used for policing, employment, insurance, and social services. Many consumers, however, have limited to no understanding of how algorithms and AIs work, which can be detrimental to consumer access, democracy, and public participation (Gran et al., 2021). Because algorithms and AIs continuously collect data on individuals, in the backgrounds of the media platforms that use them, consumers have very little control over what information is electronically selected and marketed to them. Without media literacy on algorithms and AIs, consumers may be unable to make informed decisions about their future media platform use and consumption.

Fake Information

With the increase in consumers using social media to access news, and the rise of fake news, identifying the authenticity of news has become increasingly problematic (Gereme & Zhu, 2019). Not only can fake textual news be created by individuals, or even distributed by news outlets, but recent developments in graphics editing and manipulation instruments have made it possible to generate fabricated sound and imagery (Gereme & Zhu, 2019). This means individuals can create seemingly authentic dialogues or videos of events that have not occurred. The motives for developing and distributing fake news and information include marketing and attracting revenue, distributing conspiracy theories, defaming individuals or political agendas, or influencing/confusing consumers (Gereme & Zhu, 2019). Fake information deliberately, and often methodically, influences consumers to purchase or accept biased narratives (Gereme & Zhu, 2019). Without media literacy, it can be difficult to identify the sorts of fake news or information that can result in individuals developing an unrealistic or unhelpful understanding of the world, and acting on that misinformation.

Privacy

Research by Yun et al. (2019) explored concerns about personal information privacy over five phases and three stages of data evolution. These phases are explained as:

(1) **Stage 0: Pre-stage - mainstage** (data collected before 1990), which consisted of information communication technology prior to the world wide web, such as telephone technology, business, and personal computers.

(2) **Stage 1: Internet era** – **introduction** (1991–2000), which saw the rise of the internet, e-commerce, search engines, and the world wide web.

(3) **Stage 2: Social media age** – **awareness** (2001-2007) which was the second wave of web technology development, including Wikipedia, social networking sites, google maps, YouTube, streaming services, etc.

(4) **Stage 3a: Sharing economy age** – **development** (2008-2013), which saw the rise of mobile commerce, androids, smartphones, iCloud, and big data.

(5) **Stage 3b: Transitioning to autonomous world age** – **extension** (2014-present), which is seeing the advance of mobile and

smartphone applications, as well as Apple watches, drone technology, etc. (Yun et al., 2019, p.574).

Stage 0: Pre-stage - mainstage

Yun et al. (2019) found that personal information privacy concerns have been prevalent since information communication technologies were first developed. However, because initial information communication computer technologies acted more as storage systems, these concerns were largely expressed by owners of the data (Yun et al., 2019).

Stage 1: Internet era – introduction

Research on personal information privacy concerns started to gain more traction during the beginning of the internet era. The implementation and use of e-commerce websites compromised personal information privacy because the very nature of creating digital user accounts, registering for services, ordering products online, completing review surveys, or engaging with other digital services, requires entering personal information (Yun et al., 2019). Through the use of cookies, web beacons, and ad tags, online customer engagement could be monitored to identify users' preferences and interests, to tailor products and marketing to the individual. Some e-commerce companies began selling personal information to third parties (Yun et al., 2019).

Stage 2: Social media age

The rapid rise of social media meant that individuals could create their own content using social networking sites, Wikipedia, blogs, and through creating their own media, to name a few options. This saw the rise of a significant number of people publicly sharing personal and personally identifiable information, including their full names, dates of birth, addresses, places of study, relationship status, personal interests or hobbies, and photos, including photos carrying identifying information such as car numberplates or graduation certificates (Yun et al., 2019). Such a massive disclosure of personal information made it easy for companies to data mine and target advertising. Social media also increases user vulnerability to bullying, scams, social identity theft (fake accounts where an individual copies information from a social media account to pose as the other person), and other abusive behavior (Yun et al., 2019).

Stage 3a: Sharing economy age

The sharing economy stage saw the introduction of mobile commerce, androids, smartphones, iCloud, and big data, which means that people can be tracked from wherever they are at any moment, devices can interconnect with one another, and can be monitored by distant servers or by other people through the internet (Yun et al., 2019, p.576). The rise of big data and externally hosted data environments poses new risks to personal information and privacy concerns because of the complexity of the datasets, as well as the extensive access. Devices transmit and transcribe what they hear through microphones (a game that kids play now is to say a word near their phone and see how long it takes for a related advertisement to appear on a social media platform). Data from games, social media sites and which is inputted into apps, is harvested, transmitted and sold; data, photos, and videos from devices like phones can also be harvested and sold. Many apps which are thought to meet privacy guidelines, including many children's apps, have been found to actually transmit personal data.

Stage 3b: Transitioning to an autonomous world

The evolution of media and technology means that privacy risks like this continue to increase. As a result, media producers must continually upgrade their cybersecurity programs, and the media-literate consumer needs to understand the way data are harvested and know how to set up their media platforms in a way that maximizes privacy.

The Impact of Media on Wellbeing

There is no doubt that media offer a wealth of opportunities for work, education, entertainment, socialization, and general life functioning. However, there is an abundance of research that highlights the risks associated with media engagement. This chapter does not have the capacity to touch on all the possible risks and benefits but to highlight the importance of media literacy, I will point to some of the risks to wellbeing associated with media engagement.

In 2018, the APA released the *Report of the division 14 task force on the sexualization of popular music, Division 46 (Society for Media Psychology & Technology) of the American Psychological Association* (Wright et al., 2018). This report extensively reviewed research on the impact of sexualized music media on wellbeing, finding associations with engagement with sexualized

music media and negative impacts on stereotypical gender role attitudes, sex role stereotypic schemas, gender ideals, and mathematical performance. It reported negative influences of sexualized media on the development of self-objectification, unrealistic beauty ideals, body surveillance, poor body esteem, dieting patterns, anxiety levels, unhealthy sexual attitudes, risky sexual behaviors, and sexual gendered violence (Wright et al., 2018).

Naslund et al. (2020) examined the current research on the benefits and risks of using social media for individuals with mental illness, finding that social media can facilitate social interaction and access to social support networks, and promote engagement and retention in support services. Conversely, social media can increase the risk of exposure to harm, such as bullying, which can increase depressive symptoms, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and worsen existing mental health symptoms as well as increasing social comparison pressure and social isolation (Naslund et al., 2020). Research by Viner et al. (2019) found that persistent and very frequent social media use was associated with lower wellbeing, life satisfaction, and happiness, and higher anxiety in girls.

A review of research on the impact of cyberbullying involvement across the lifespan reported negative impacts on mental health, social esteem, and emotional capacity in cyberbullying victims. Specifically, across multiple studies, elementary students who had been cyberbullied reported feelings of stress, worry, fear, embarrassment, anger, lower self-esteem, loneliness, poor peer relationships, fewer friends, lower levels of social acceptance, less school connectiveness, and depression (Betts 2022). For adolescents, the research results were mixed, however, there is some evidence that victims of cyberbullying experience similar negative feelings to students in elementary school; poor psychosocial adjustment, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and somatic symptoms, and they may engage in self-harming, and aggressive and risk-taking behaviors (Betts, 2022).

Advertising is highly influential in purchasing behaviors for both adults and children. For this reason, some brands create anthropomorphized or fantasy characters to market their product to children and gain loyalty (for example, M&M Characters (named red, blue, etc.), Tony the Tiger (Kellogg's Frosted Flakes), Chester Cheetah (Frito-Lay's Cheetos), and Quicky the Rabbit (Nesquik) (Veirman et al., 2019)). Other brands may license a popular children's character to endorse their product, such as SpongeBob SquarePants (Yoplait, GoGurt). The release of a new children's movie is often accompanied by the characters (e.g., minions, superheroes, Disney

princesses) appearing on a variety of products such as yogurt, ice-cream, candy, drinks, macaroni cheese, or meal deals from big food chains (Veirman et al., 2019). Some of these characters have social media accounts, such as Facebook and Twitter, to further develop a relationship with the consumer. Kelly (2019) argues that children are exposed to advertising all day, from when they wake up until they go to bed. She states that on an average school day, children are exposed to advertising on cereal or breakfast packaging, on billboards on the way to and from school, on vending machines while at school, and while at extra-curricular activities (i.e., scoreboards), while watching television, while engaging with the internet, social media, digital games, and while reading magazines. Research from New Zealand in which year 8 children (aged 11-13 years) wore a camera that captured images of their environment every seven seconds for four consecutive days, to examine the frequency and nature of everyday exposure to food marketing across multiple media and settings, found that on average, children were exposed to 27 unhealthy food advertisements compared to 12 healthy food advertisements per day (Signal et al. 2017, p.1). Kelly (2019) cites several systematic reviews that provide evidence that unhealthy food marketing increases children's knowledge of the availability of unhealthy foods and impacts their food preferences, consumption patterns, and physical health (weight gain and diet-related disease).

Although what I have presented here is not an extensive review of the current research on the potential negative impacts of media on children's and young people's health and wellbeing, it provides some insight into the importance of media consumers having sound media literacy skills.

What is Media Literacy?

The term 'literacy' has been persistently evolving over time. Historically, 'literacy' referred to reading and writing, which evolved to inform the development of multiple forms of literacy, including print literacy, audio-visual literacy, critical literacy, visual literacy, oral literacy, cultural literacy or social literacy (Livingstone, 2004, p.2). These literacies are generally based on the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from, information presented in a particular form (e.g., the form of an image or context). For example, visual literacy is the ability to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, and symbols within the environment (Fransecky & Debes, 1972), and cultural literacy is understanding a given culture's signs and symbols, including language, values, idioms, customs,

and so on (Hirsch, 1987). With the rise of the internet in the 1990s (Yun et al., 2019), when dominant media shifted from print-based to digital media, an array of new literacies emerged, including 'computer literacy, cyber-literacy, internet literacy, network literacy, digital literacy, information literacy' (Livingstone, 2004, p. 2) which often related to the logical, practical ability of the term., For example, being computer literate is simply being able to use a computer (Livingstone, 2004) which became confusing and problematic. With the rise of new media that integrates print, audio-visual, telephony and computer media (Livingstone, 2004, p.2), scholars explored what skills and abilities are required to effectively and safely use new media. In the 1990s, media literacy was termed and defined as 'the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts' (Livingstone, 2004, p.3).

According to Livingstone (2004), **access** rests on the social and conditional circumstances of consumers and, as such, requires media consumers to continually address particular provisions for access (for example, updating and upgrading hardware and software applications). She argues that socio-demographic inequalities impact access to online knowledge, communication, and participation.

In relation to **analysis,** Livingstone (2004) states that media consumers need to be able to interpret and decode audio-visual material to effectively engage with media. She points to the work of Buckingham that highlights a need for skills in media agency, categories, technologies, languages, audiences, and representation. Buckingham (2006) does not define these terms, but rather provides questions adapted from the British Film Institute's primary curriculum statement as an educative tool to support media analysis. Buckingham posed the following questions people can ask about the media they consume:

Media Agencies

Who is communicating what, and why?

Who produces a text, roles in the production process, media institutions, economics and ideology, intentions and results?

Media Categories

What type of text is it?

Different media (television, radio, cinema, etc.), forms (documentary, advertising, etc.), genres (science fiction, soap opera, etc.), other ways of categorizing texts, and how categorization relates to understanding.

Media Technologies

How is it produced?

What kinds of technologies are available to whom, how to use them, and the differences they make to the production process as well as the final product.

Media Languages

How do we know what it means?

How the media produce meanings, codes, and conventions, narrative structures.

Media Audiences

Who receives it, and what sense do they make of it?

How audiences are identified, constructed, addressed, and reached, and how audiences find, choose, consume, and respond to texts.

Media Representations

How does it present its subject?

The relationship between media texts and actual places, people, events, and ideas, stereotyping and its consequences (Buckingham, 2006, p.39)

Livingstone (2004) suggests that **evaluation** is critical to media literacy. Evaluating media information and sources requires a substantial understanding of the 'social, cultural, economic, political and historical contexts in which media content is produced' (Livingstone, 2004, p.5). The ability to critically evaluate information and sources allows the consumer to distinguish between biased, dated, false and exploitative material, in an era where all individuals can be consumers and/or producers. In an environment such as the world wide web, which is overloaded with content, being able

to evaluate information and sources supports users in engaging with media effectively and safely.

Content creation relates to the creation and production of symbolic texts. It is argued that by creating and producing media, individuals will develop a greater understanding of the conventions and virtues of digital material, which will not only support their media analysis and evaluation skills, but will help them utilize the internet to their full potential (Livingstone, 2004).

To become literate in media literacy, all four elements of media literacy must be present and developed.

Media Literacy Opportunities in the United States

There are key concerns about American children's and young people's access to media literacy, relative to access, analysis, evaluation, and content creation.

In relation to access, Chandra et al. (2020) report that in the United States, there is a significant digital divide between K-12 students who have access to technology and the internet and those who don't. Research in 2020 by The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and Common Sense Media, in partnership with Education Superhighway and Southern Education Foundation (SEF), explored the digital divide for students during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced American students into distance learning (Ali et al., 2021). They reported that in 2018, approximately 15-16 million K–12 public school students (or 30% of all K-12 public school students) lacked adequate internet access, an e-learning device, or both, prior to the pandemic. This was largely due to lack of affordability (9 million students), lack of availability through insufficient broadband coverage (4 million students), and adoption barriers such as insufficient digital skills, language barriers, discomfort with providing personal data, family mobility, or lack of interest (6 million students). While government efforts to close the gap in the digital divide provided some success, the funded solutions are short-term, and approximately 12 million students remained ineffectively connected heading into 2021 (Ali et al., 2021).

In relation to analysis, evaluation, and content creation, the United States Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts Standards addresses all of these media literacy elements (Ey, 2017). Media literacy skills are embedded throughout the Standards, rather than addressed as a

separate topic (National Governors Association Center for Best Practice and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). From kindergarten, American children are introduced to media texts and explore digital tools to produce media. Content creation increases in complexity as they progress through the school years. By year two, children are beginning to analyze media at a fundamental level, which again increases in complexity as they progress through the school years (See Ey, 2017 for more detail). From year six, students evaluate claims in a text, distinguishing whether claims are supported by reasons and evidence or not, however, there is no clear link to understanding the social, cultural, economic, political, and historical contexts in which media content is produced until years 11-12, and much of this is presented in the literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects (National Governors Association Center for Best Practice and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Key concerns about media literacy education in the United States are that the Common Core State Standards are not mandatory. However, in 2015, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2016) reported that "41 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) have adopted the Common Core and are implementing the Standards according to their own time lines" (np). However, this still leaves 11 states with independent curricula, in which media literacy education may be more poorly or better addressed. Another key concern with the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts Standards is that the media literacy element of evaluation is scarce before years 11-12 (National Governors Association Center for Best Practice and Council of Chief State School Officers 2010). As such, this places individuals that do not complete years 11 and 12 at a significant disadvantage in media literacy skills. According to Livingstone (2004), evaluating media is critical to media literacy.

Implications and Recommendations

Currently, media literacy education in the United States is present, but it does not rigorously cover all media literacy elements until the senior years of high school. Additionally, there are concerns about access (Ali et al. 2021, Chandra et al. 2020). The current system provides "college- and career-readiness standards, which address what students are expected to know and understand by the time they graduate from high school, and the K-12 standards, which address expectations for elementary school through high school" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2016). As such,

states, schools, and educators are responsible for developing educational activities to reach the set learnings and milestones. Although this provides the freedom for states, schools, and educators to construct learning relevant to the context of their schools, the limitations lie within what content educators explore, and what connections educators make to support children's and students' critical media literacy skills. Given the increasing role of educators in children's and student's learning, development, wellbeing, and safety, it is unlikely educators have the time to keep up with current research to inform their teaching. Thus, they may not adequately address key social issues relevant to media.

To better address media literacy in the United States education system, it is recommended that:

1. Policymakers commit funding to invest in the long-term education of all K-12 students, which involves enabling access to digital learning. Chandra et al. (2020) state that this means upgrading the nation's broadband infrastructure, funding internet service and e-devices for students who do not have them, addressing the adoption barriers, such as insufficient digital skills, language barriers, and discomfort with providing personal data, and upskilling educators on distance learning techniques.
2. The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts Standards introduce the media literacy element of 'evaluating' much sooner than the current standard requires, gradually increasing the complexity of evaluation alongside analysis and content creation.
3. The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts Standards introduce an accompanying document highlighting key concerns relative to media literacy concerns, such as, but not limited to, algorithms and AIs, fake information, privacy, and media impacts on wellbeing. Research by Ey (2017) that analyzed media literacy education in the Australian National Curriculum and The United States Common Core State Standards found that education about media influence on personal development was minimal, and was often introduced too late, leaving children and students vulnerable to harm.
4. All states move to either adopt or, at minimum, review, the components relative to media literacy education in the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts Standards to ensure students in their state/s are accessing the minimum media literacy skills.

Conclusion

Media plays an important role in social functioning and engagement. American children and young people are heavy consumers of media. Whilst media greatly benefits individuals and society at large, there are potential harms associated with it. Research has demonstrated that the consumers of new media are concerned, and have limited information, about algorithms and AIs, identifying real or false information, and privacy. Additionally, media messages contribute to social and cultural values, which often shape consumers' ideas and behaviors. Media can both positively and negatively impact consumers' socialization, mental health, life satisfaction, eating habits, and much more. To increase the benefits of media and lessen the potential harm, we must become critical readers, viewers, and consumers of media. Media literacy involves the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages across a variety of contexts. Those with sophisticated media literacy can interpret, decode, and evaluate media when engaging with, or developing, media content, and are better positioned to engage with media effectively and safely.

In the United States, students are taught media literacy aligned with the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts Standards. However, not all states have adopted this, which means it is unclear what children in the 11 states that have not adopted the Standards are being taught about media literacy. Furthermore, there are gaps in the key elements of media literacy being taught in the Standards, limiting students from becoming critical media consumers. The digital divide for some American students further limits their ability to develop strong media literacy skills. To close the gap, policymakers must address current broadband issues, poverty, and professional development for teachers, to enable students' access, and the Standards need to be reviewed and further developed to enhance the key elements of media literacy, in particular, the element of evaluation.

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CHAPTER 2

THE NEED FOR MEDIA LITERACY

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What is Media Literacy?

Media literacy refers to the ability to analyze messages put forth by the media critically, and to recognize the credibility of the source. Media literacy supports individuals in identifying how the media attempt to influence their attitudes, beliefs, and their perception of the world around them (Johnson, 2007). Its relevance goes beyond more than just mainstream media. All forms of media are relevant to the discussion of media influence, including, but not limited to, film, music, television, radio, tabloids, newspapers, social media, and other internet platforms.

For the average person interacting with media, it can be difficult to identify what information accurately reflects reality versus what is motivated by the biases of its creators (Bonczek, 2007). The purpose of media literacy is to act as a buffer between consumers and the goals and agendas of media sources. Media can influence individuals on personal and socio-cultural levels, which is why media literacy is crucial to helping consumers understand the impact of media. As advances in media technology help the world become better connected, it is still vital that individuals know the potential dangers of media and the importance of media literacy.

The Extent of Media Presence

In today's world, media is omnipresent. Media technology is an integral part of a globalized society connected by the desire to create, share, inform, and learn. People depend on the media in their daily lives, where it functions as an educator, agent of communication, business platform, and much more.

Not only does the media's influence extend across the world, but it also extends across all age groups. Young people are growing up in a world flooded with media in their homes, schools, and communities. Although media is a central point in their lives, children and adolescents are among the most susceptible to the influence of biased media presentations (Besana et al., 2020; Mirkin, 2017; Scull et al., 2021). Young people consuming media are still constructing their understanding of reality, differentiating between right and wrong, and learning who, and what, is worthy of their trust. Developmental researchers have found that social media may have as big an impact on how adolescents develop morals, social norms, and ideals as their parents and schools (Mirkin, 2017). Now, more than ever, there is a need for children and adolescents to have high levels of media literacy to ensure that the media they consume improves rather than undermines their understanding of reality and confers developmental benefits rather than deficits (Warburton & Anderson, 2022).

The extent of media influence can best be understood by its rapidly expanding access and exchange of information (Bonczek, 2007; Johnson, 2007). Worldwide, individuals use media to form opinions and beliefs, learn about international events, and interact with others. However, the consumer is responsible for objectively assessing media content to ensure that it is factual and accurate. Consumers can accurately assess media content by implementing media literacy skills, which help individuals break down the purpose of the media content and assess the source's reliability.

What Skills are Involved in Media Literacy?

To illustrate what media literacy entails, consider the goals of *Media Aware*, a web-based media literacy education program aimed at improving adolescent sexual health (Scull et al., 2021). This program was designed to address the influence media has on the beliefs and attitudes around sex in adolescents, with the intention of decreasing risky sexual behaviors. Specifically, it aimed to decrease the perceived realism of unhelpful media messages about sex, decrease the perceived similarity between risky teen sexual behavior depicted in media and actual teen sexual behavior, increase the adolescents' critical evaluations of sexual media messaging, and increase their skepticism about media messages relating to sexual behaviors and substance use (Scull et al., 2021).

As seen in *Media Aware,* the first goal of media literacy is to understand how to critically evaluate and filter through messages presented in the