

## Media Literacy: A Foundation for Citizenship

Written by Beth Thornton

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### Background

Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor and now professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, has posed a provocative question in his book, *Supercapitalism*:

“Are we just consumers? Or are we also participants and citizens?”

Reich goes on to say, “Every time you are tempted to just get up and leave because you don’t like something, exercising your shopping habits, just stop for a moment...and ask if there is an engagement, a participation alternative that could help you and help an institution cultivate the habits of citizenship. It starts at home.”

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At The Consortium for Media Literacy, we ask, "Shouldn't we play all three roles in our everyday lives – that of consumers, participants and citizens?" In our shopping as consumers, and in our purchasing as consumers, don't we “buy” a combination of the company's product, its advertising and its worldview? Don't we “vote” with our pocketbooks, every day and in every way? And don't our choices count? Don't companies and nonprofits and education organizations all rely on our choices for their own survival and fulfillment of their missions? And

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don't our politicians and political institutions rely on these same forces?

Through media literacy, youth and adults alike begin to understand their relationship with media, which is the conduit through which we engage with society at large. With media literacy education, students begin to foster skills that provide them with the critical autonomy to make decisions they perceive in their best interests. In a sense, media literacy is an exercise in risk analysis, because in understanding and in providing information, we make decisions based on what we know. What we know is never perfect or complete, and we therefore take the leap of faith, and we vote or we buy or we deny.

Making these decisions involves the whole person -- the heart and the spirit and the mind, and these decisions not only affect us personally but also impact people from throughout the world, even if in a small way. It is therefore imperative to understand the context of these decisions, to see ourselves as citizens of the world as well as citizens of our communities or states or countries.

The state of democracy depends upon the every-day decisions of all citizens. Whether the decision is to smoke or to eat, or to vote or to protest, or to go to our child's school play or to buy a videogame, each decision impacts our society and our way of life. The state of our health, the state of our roads, the state of education, the state of our retirement plans – each and every “state” is the concern of the State, and this concern is ultimately rooted in the individuals who contribute to it.

And it is through media that we access the information that tells us what state we are in. It is through the media that we make our views known and represent ourselves to those who represent us. Media literacy contributes to a deeper understanding of this role of media in our society, of the importance of the Fourth Estate. And in achieving this understanding, it is just as important to understand what media literacy is NOT:

- Media literacy is NOT media bashing. The media exist, they are, and they will continue to play an important role in our lives. Media are enjoyable. Media are frightening. Media are informative. Media are misleading. But regardless, media are omnipresent. That's why it's incumbent upon us to understand our relationship with media and to actively engage with it.
- Media literacy is NOT telling others what to think or believe. Instead, media literacy provides the tools of critical thinking – a methodology for learning and teaching critical thinking skills – that empower individuals to make their own choices in a hopefully more informed way.
- Media literacy is NOT fostering cynicism, nor is it about being a Pollyanna. Media literacy

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encourages a healthy skepticism through a process of inquiry. It is through asking questions that we find answers.

- Media literacy is NOT just using media to teach. Media literacy provides a distinct pedagogy based on the Five Core Concepts ([link](#)) of media literacy. These Five Core Concepts apply to both deconstruction and construction of media, and therein lie their power to provide the process skills that are so needed in learning to be wise consumers, producers and participants in the media world.

The 21st Century skills of media literacy are the skills that provide citizens with the base of knowledge that they need to be effective participants in 21st century society around the world. Having these skills, and knowing how to apply them in a process of Awareness, Analysis, Reflection, and Action, known as the Empowerment Spiral, prepares all citizens to take on their duties as the first line of defense, the first line of health care providers, the first line as caregivers and the first line as active and enlightened citizens.

It is this understanding, and the role that media plays in every-day life, that provides an essential link for media literacy and citizenship – and by having enlightened, media literate citizens, participation is an opportunity that will surely get plenty of votes.