

54th Alfred Korzybski Memorial Lecture Literacy in the 21st Century

Renee Hobbs, Ed.D., Director, Media Education Lab, Temple University

It's such an honor to be here. What a pleasure it was to spend the last two days with you. My acknowledgments go to Steve Stockdale and the board members for inviting me to the conference. You can't possibly have known that my first experience with general semantics was as a 23-year-old at the University of Michigan. When I was getting my master's degree, they thought I could teach public speaking. I don't know why because I'd never taken a course in public speaking, but they threw me to the undergraduates. In preparing for that course, I read Hayakawa. That was my first exposure to general semantics. And in the 25 years since then, I have used that text in teaching courses in human communication and media studies. And while never really a member of the general semantics community, my ideas and interests in the complex nature of the symbol systems that are used for expression and communication have been influenced by some of the ideas I encountered there.

It's also a little humbling because that list of honorees for this lecture is so overwhelming. I am very honored to count on that list a former professor of mine, Jerry Bruner, who was a teacher of mine at Harvard. It's with a great sense of humility that I carry on in some way because certainly the ideas of Gregory Bateson, Abraham Maslow, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Ellen Langer and many others you have previously honored are people who have had a deep influence on my own work.

Tonight I come to you with the three hats that I'm always wearing: as a scholar, as a teacher, and as an activist. I want to share with you a little bit about my experience in those three arenas as it relates to my life long passion for media literacy. When you hear that phrase "media literacy" you might think that those two words don't seem to go together. But because of your connection to one of the most esteemed media literacy experts of the twentieth century, Neil Postman, you're familiar with the concept. It's the idea of learning to critically analyze messages and communicate ideas using the wide variety of tools of symbolic expression that are now part of 21st century American culture.

Media literacy emphasizes the idea of being an analyst, a critical thinker; it emphasizes the importance of responding to media culture and being able to use tools of technology for purposes of self-expression and communication. In that sense, we have to see media literacy as an extension of the concept of literacy. These days there're lots of literacies. There's health literacy. There's information literacy. There's cyber literacy. You name it, and there is a literacy for it. But if you think deeply about what the concept of literacy represents, it makes absolute sense that we're now moving to redefine or expand the concept of literacy to include mass media, popular culture, and technology. Literacy is the exchange of meaning through symbol systems and now those symbol systems come in a dizzying array of genres, types and forms.

We can find a good example of expanding the concept of literacy right here in the state of Texas. In 1998, Texas educators sat down to do the work that Ted Sizer, a previous AKML honoree, has suggested is at the heart of all efforts at education reform and renewal. Teachers across the state of Texas sat down and asked each other, "What do students need to be able to know and be able to do?" In the area of language arts, Texas educators recognized that children needed to learn how to critically analyze media and compose using digital media. So they did something kind of radical. In 1998, they expanded the concept of literacy to include reading, writing, speaking, listening, and two new literacies they called "viewing and representing." They understood "viewing" as learning to analyze the persuasive techniques of advertising, the strategies used to communicate credibility in informational texts, and the narrative and stylistic devices used in filmmaking. By "representing," they meant learning to use all the forms of contemporary 21st century communication for self-expression: learning to write a letter to the editor, design a billboard, put together a public relations campaign, and create a website or a documentary film. In fact, in Texas in grade 10, students in English language arts are required to put together a 5 to 7 minute documentary working in a team, learning to use



the power of images and language and sound to communicate an informational message. At a practical level, that's new literacy. That's media literacy.

For the last 20 years, a big challenge that I've been tackling is how to help teachers, parents and community members learn how to deploy this new literacy. Of course, that is a colossal challenge as you're so well aware: how best to develop pragmatic ways of exploring these rich and powerful ideas about symbol systems and thinking; about communication and expression; and their impact on us as individuals, as a culture, and as a society. How do these important ideas fit into the world of the everyday classroom teacher? The average middle school or high school teacher has five preparations a day and 130 students. Teachers are terrifically underpaid and overworked in what sometimes is a kind of oppressive environment, with few of the perks and benefits that other professionals take for granted, like a phone or a working computer.







How do we help teachers to use the processes of analyzing media and composing with digital media tools, under the routines and pressures of the K-12 curriculum, which can be so fixed, traditional, and resistant to change? To accomplish this, I followed in the Korzybskian tradition. I created a model. Yesterday, when I saw the beautiful model [of the structural differential] that Kerrick Murray presented, I thought, yes, that's it. The tradition of model making is a powerful way to help people visualize complex and abstract ideas.

So I'd like to share with you my model for media literacy that I hope you find valuable and useful. I think it's a good short-hand way to try to explain what media literacy is if you only have 10 minutes. At your table, you see an envelope. Take the envelope and pass it around — inside you'll find several of my media literacy remote control cards. I'd like to review the functions of this unique remote control with you, if everyone will take a copy. Does everyone have one? I'm left-handed, so I recommend you hold it in your left hand. I think it works better. Hold it with the remote control facing forward. I'd like to explain to you how this remote control works.


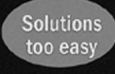
You can see that it works with any kind of symbolic expression: books, the Internet, movies, music, video games, newspapers, TV, radio, magazines. You press any of the media buttons, for instance, the newspaper button. And then go up to the top left corner where it says "True/False." It's the "reality check" button. Press the reality check button, and instantly comes flooding into your consciousness an understanding of what is accurate and inaccurate about a particular message. Let's say, for example, you're reading the *New York Times*, probably, by almost any account the best newspaper in the United States. We still have to use the reality check button because there are many different reasons why there are inaccuracies in the *New York Times*. The content of a daily newspaper reflects the best understanding held by reporters and editors at a particular point in time. But you know that *New York Times* reporters, like all reporters, face deadline pressure. You know that they depend on what their sources tell them, which is sometimes accurate and sometimes not. You know that events are processes, not fixed and static. These dimensions bring with them opportunities for inaccuracies to accumulate. Learning to distinguish between what's accurate and inaccurate in the media messages we receive is a media literacy skill.

Let's take another skill that helps people be critical thinkers in an information age. It's represented by the "Private Gain or Public Good" button. See the dollar sign? Press this button and you instantly get the answer to the question "Who's making money from this message?" That's a vitally important question when you're watching TV or reading the *New York Times*, just to continue with our example. For every one journalist in America, there are five public relations professionals, many of them having had extensive training in general semantics. Now there is nothing wrong with public relations professionals. They are communicating the interests of their firms, trying to get out the message that is in the best interest of their company. Journalists are

TURN OFF AND DISCUSS

		
Reality Check	Private Gain or Public Good?	Values Check
		
Read between the lines	What's left out	Record/Save for later

WARNING

	
Off	Books
TV	Internet
Newspapers	Movies
Radio	Music
Magazines	Video Games

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trying to sort through all that and present something meaningful for their readers. Every reader of a newspaper or viewer of a television news program has to have this button on their media literacy remote control constantly in action. Why is the Disneyland feature happening on your local TV news come springtime? Well, because Disney wants people to go to Orlando, and so they offer this “news” to local TV news shows, right about February when we’re planning our spring holidays.

Back in the 1970s, when I was an English literature major at the University of Michigan, we never learned about this; we didn’t explore the private gain/public good button or ask, “Who is making money?” In fact, my teachers created a kind of fancy myth about this button. The myth was about the centrality of the artist, the writer, the poet, the communicator; well, she was like Emily Dickinson. She was up in New England in her garret by the light of her candle making her marvelous little poems, those little gems of humanity that spoke to the preciousness of human experience and the vulnerability that we have in daily confronting our mortality. When I was an English literature major, nobody told me about Emily Dickinson’s publisher, the entrepreneur, the risk taker, who said, “These poems in the drawer, they’re curious. They’re interesting. I’ll take a risk and I’ll publish them and I may or may not make money.” We only know about Emily Dickinson’s poems today because of that publisher, that entrepreneur, that businessman who took a risk. In fact, all media messages — our poetry, our art, as well as our popular culture — come to us within an economic framework. It’s not bad, it’s not good, it just is. Part of becoming a citizen of an information age is coming to terms with this reality: messages exist within an economic framework. Being media literate means recognizing how economics has an influence on what we see and what we never see.

Now take a look at the “Good/Bad” button, the values check button. This one gets activated a lot for me when I’m watching television, because often I find myself laughing at messages that have really deeply problematic values, messages that when I think about them carefully and critically using my media literacy remote control, turn out to be deeply troubling. For instance, I don’t know if you’ve seen the Doritos commercial that says, in effect, “What would you do for a Doritos?” In the little story that plays out in the ad, there are two adorable teenagers driving in a car, running over a little old lady on their way to get a bag of Doritos. She tumbles over the front windshield of their car in a very humorous way. You can’t help but laugh, it’s so funny the way she tumbles over the car. A Doritos is a corn chip. The values message is clear. Through humor we can cover up or make acceptable deeply problematic cultural values like the message of this ad, which tells us: “Do anything to satisfy your needs.” We can see the values embedded in media messages when we start paying attention to them — when we take them seriously. Values messages are present in the most innocuous commercials, in the films that we see, in the Internet sites we visit, in the songs we listen to on the radio. Learning to recognize values messages is a key aspect of being literate.

Then there’s the “Read-Between-the-Lines” button. People with interests in general semantics do this well. In so many ways this weekend, I saw how your analysis of social environments, texts, and processes is influenced by the skill of reading between the lines. The visual symbol I’m using here is a magnifying glass. For me, the read-between-the-lines button speaks powerfully to the issue of identity. Over the last couple of days, you’ve talked about identity at this conference; I’ve been fascinated at how people’s conceptualization of identity informs their understanding of the power of language, symbol systems and expression. To describe this button, I can offer a very simple-minded example. Say, for instance, I’m watching television and on comes the Maybelline Ultra Lash commercial. Have you ever seen that commercial? It’s a beautiful commercial. It’s got pictures of pretty girls, jazzy music, and there are just five words: “longer, thicker lashes instantly, Maybelline.” When I’m using the media literacy remote control and I press the read-between-the-lines button, I instantly recognize the message subtext: you’d look better if your lashes were longer and thicker. Now that’s an insult. Imagine if the commercial actually vocalized the subtext. Viewers would be furious and insulted.

But actually it’s not a surprising or unusual subtext and it’s a topic that Neil Postman wrote about this more than 20 years ago. Advertising is built on a problem-solution structure. The solution is the product. The problem is not stated directly. You, the message receiver, create the problem. You build that problem in your mind. From an advertiser’s point of view, that is exactly

*The solution is
the product.
You ... create
the problem.*

the kind of inadequacy and inferiority that keeps you consuming the product.

My two teenagers, who are growing up in the 21st century, have conflated the idea of consumption and identity. For them, to be is to buy. For them, these two concepts are so closely intertwined and woven in their psyches that a big part of our work as a family is to push them apart and disentangle those ideas for our teens. How vulnerable and helpless and inadequate you are, if you're growing up always feeling like your identity is based on what you possess. Media literacy aims to help examine cultural values by giving people some tools for recognizing and resisting the conjoined ideas of identity and consumption.

I guess I really owe a debt of gratitude to those in the general semantics community for the button labeled "What's Left Out." You might just imagine my delight these past few days as, so many times, Wendell Johnson was quoted saying that it's important to ask, "What's left out?" One of the best ways to see the biases and points of view of a media message is to notice what's not there, what's not being presented. Learning to see point of view is enhanced when we ask this "what's left out?" question. It's a central concept of media literacy.

Finally, there's my favorite button: the "Record/Save for Later" button. Let's just say that I took this remote control to the guys at MIT and they made a media literacy remote control as a real product. Then I could sell it, perhaps in four easy payments by having people call a 1-800 number. Perhaps I could throw in some ginsu knives. In the United States and in many

other nations, we like to believe that buying things is a way to solve your problems. Here's your problem: you're not media literate. If you buy the technology, voila! Your problems are solved. Now, if there were only one button the guys at MIT could provide for me, I'd ask for the record/save for later button. You know why? I don't know about you, but I'm drowning in Too Much. I have too much voicemail, too much email, too many cable channels, too many magazines and books to read, too many choices at the movie rental place. When I go to the Barnes and Noble, it's overwhelming. The average Barnes and Noble bookstore has 50,000 books in it. Then there's amazon.com. Then there's e-bay. Then there's all those blogs and websites I'm supposed to be paying attention to. I'm drowning in too many choices: too many choices of entertainment, too many choices of information. I only have so much time. The scarce resource in an information age is human attention.

One essential skill for being media literate in an information age is learning how to deploy your attention, how to choose what's worth paying attention to. If you think about it, we just don't do a very good job of helping children and young people sort through that challenging task. In fact, we're all seduced by digital media, visual media, and electronic media, which tells us what to pay attention to: if it jiggles, bounces, spins, has sex, violence, children, animals or UFOs, we'll pay attention to it. Learning how to deploy your attention is a key literacy skill in an era where there are just so many choices and where message makers have learned so many tricks for capturing and holding attention. The ability to control one's own attention for satisfying one's own needs is a dimension of being media literate.

Now, you'll see that my remote control has a "Stereotype Alert" button. That would blink when you're surrounded by messages featuring corrupt politicians, dangerous rappers, dumb blondes, and beefy Texas athletes. And then there's the "Solution is Too Easy" button. We are surrounded by messages that oversimplify complex realities. For example, those big pharmaceutical industries tell us: just take a pill. Those politicians tell us: just vote for me. The media literacy remote control reminds us when media messages present solutions that are too simple, too easy. Recognizing stereotypes and oversimplifications are dimensions of being media literate.

But simplifications are necessary for us as communicators. Tonight I have shared with you the power of one specific visual metaphor, the media literacy remote control, which is a little like the structural differential in your community. The media literacy remote control is another way to take a complex set of thinking skills and collapse them into a form that

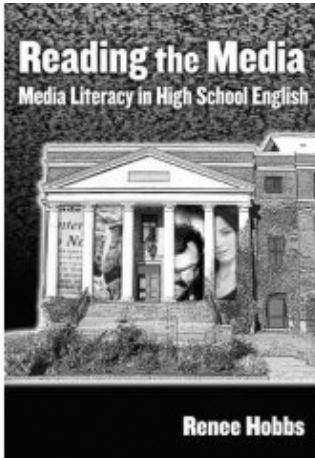
Key Questions of Media Literacy

1. Who is the author and what is the purpose of the message?
2. What techniques are used to attract your attention?
3. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented?
4. How might different people interpret the message differently?
5. What is omitted from the message?

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people can wrap their brains around and use practically in their real life. That's the same kind of contribution that general semantics has made over a large part of the 20th century — offering people practical tools for living. Over the last two days, I've seen the application of those powerful ideas in many different disciplines and specialties. It is a mission worth pushing forward for the next generation. I am absolutely convinced that general semantics, like media literacy, is a vital set of thinking skills for the 21st century.



Renee Hobbs (Philadelphia),
David Hewson (New South Wales, Australia),
Dr. Abdul Salaam (Chicago, IL)

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