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Media Use by Chinese and U.S. Secondary Students: Implications for Media Literacy Education

This article examines how children currently use media, the influence of media in their lives, and implications for media literacy education. Trends in the use of media (TV, radio, computer, videogames, Internet) by Chinese and American secondary students are presented, drawn from major national studies on American and Chinese children's media use. It shows what and how students use new media at home and in schools, and demonstrates the important role of modern technology in children's lives. We underscore the importance of media literacy education. Even though media literacy education is not systematically taught as part of the formal school curricu-

lum, it can be integrated into school curriculum with specific strategies by educators, parents, and adolescents.

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AS THE GLOBAL VILLAGE continues to be wired up electronically, and as individuals move their daily lives online, mass media plays a tremendous and increasing role in society, providing information as well as entertainment (Clay, 2003). Young people today live media-saturated lives, spending an average of 6.5 hr a day using media, and are exposed to media more than 8.5 hr a day (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). Virtually all that people know about the world beyond their immediate experience comes to them through mass media, TV, radio, and the Internet. Over the past few years, we have heard comments such as, "I need to find a way to stop my son from playing shooting games till 2 in

the morning.” “Mom, I posted a question from my Algebra homework on YahooAsk, and guess what? Four responses came within 5 minutes! Amazing, isn’t it?” “I love YouTube. You get all kinds of videos and music that you want, but I wonder how I can make sure my kids are not accessing things they are not supposed to?” “My grandpa watched me playing flute on Web cam last night. Pretty cool!” “Ohio Virtual Academy provides home school parents with lots of great resources.” These comments highlight celebrations of children’s media use and related issues and concerns.

Along with the media saturation in society come public attention and various concerns about children and their use of media. The list of issues surrounding the concerns includes the impact of the Internet on society, the relationship between media and gender, democracy, social development, vanishing ethnic cultures, effects of media on education, digital divide, generation gaps, and many more. “We can not even begin to address these questions—or to ask the many others we should be discussing—without first establishing just what role media play in young people’s lives” (Roberts et al., 2005, p. 4). Before we engage in any conversations about how to educate children to become mature consumers of new media, (i.e., media literacy education at home and in schools), we need to establish how children use media and how influential media use is in their lives. This article represents a beginning by looking at the trends and characteristics of Chinese and American adolescents’ media use, discussing the need for media literacy education for children, suggesting what and where media literacy education should focus, and providing specific ideas for the integration of media literacy education in the school curriculum. It aims to inform policy makers, school administrators, parents, and adolescents in the two countries about the continued need for media literacy education.

Perspectives and Background

We believe that media literacy refers to the understanding of media and the use of it as

a source of information, entertainment, enrichment, growth, empowerment, and communication (Wan, 2006). Equally important to understanding media is to use information technology (IT) rather than allowing IT to use you (Wan, 2006). According to Thoman (1995), critical media literacy incorporates three stages that lead to the empowerment of citizens of all ages: (a) becoming aware of the importance of making choices and managing the amount of time spent with television, videos, electronic games, films, and various print media forms; (b) learning specific skills of critical viewing and surfing—learning to analyze and question what is in the frame/on the screen, how it is constructed, and what may have been left out; and (c) exploring deeper issues of who produces the media that people experience and for what purposes. In other words: Who profits? Who loses? And who decides? There would not be such an urgent need for media literacy education for children if the media that people use on a daily basis simply reflected reality, were neutral, and value free. All the media messages that individuals come in contact with contain information about values, beliefs, and behaviors and are shaped by economic factors (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1989).

New media allow children nonlinear browsing, interactivity, manipulation of images, sound, various ways of communicating, and many other amazing things that most have never even dreamed of. “If students are to use new media to their own greatest advantage, they too must learn to creatively and critically browse, research, organize, select, and produce communication forms that use the full spectrum of literacy tools available to them” (Tyner, 2003, p. 374). In addition, new media are changing the ways that teaching and learning have been done for centuries. Schools cannot operate as if the only way to teach is through traditional classroom instruction. Thus, becoming literate in the new century means that both teachers and students need to understand the influence of media on our society, develop strategies to critically analyze media, become independent from the influence of media, and open up their minds to embrace and experiment with new tools of teaching and

learning provided by the information age. No child's education is complete without media literacy education.

Media Literacy in the United States

It is common to hear calls for media literacy education in the schools on a regular basis. Kubey and Baker (1999) argued that, for 4 decades, both young people and adults in society have spent the majority of their leisure time in contact with electronic media. But all too many schools still operate as if the only forms of expression worthy of study are the poem, the short story, and the novel. FCC Commissioner Michael Copps (2006) called for a sustained K–12 media literacy program to teach students not only how to use media but how the media uses them.

For 25 years, media literacy has been an established field of study in the school curriculum for many countries such as Canada, Australia, and England (Kubey, 2003; Thoman & Jolls, 2005). The United States has lagged behind these countries in the formal delivery of media education, and the reasons are historical, political, and sociological (Kubey, 2003). According to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2007) policy research brief, new literacies that cannot be ignored are being developed on a daily basis. Although curriculum frameworks and national curriculum standards in all 50 states require some form of media literacy skills (Baker, 2006; Kubey & Baker, 1999) be included in the curriculum, and 33 states have adopted National Educational Technology Standards for K–12 students (NCTE, 2007), for various reasons, media literacy is not taught systematically in U.S. schools.

The United States remains the only developed English-speaking country in the world without a consistently- and widely-taught media education component in its standard school curriculum (Gregorian, 2006). Some states place elements of media literacy in English Language and Communication Arts. Others embed it in Health, Consumer Studies, or in Social Studies,

History, and Civics (Baker, 2006). Baker provides examples of how media literacy can be developed in various standards. Aligning with the Ohio State Standards in English/Language Arts, media literacy may be integrated into teaching techniques of persuasion, or practiced while dissecting the language of film. It can be incorporated into Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities when teaching students to acquire, interpret, and analyze information regarding national issues. And finally, in grades 5–8, visual arts students can create artwork (e.g., a satirical drawing, political cartoon, or advertising campaign) that expresses a personal comment about a social, environmental, or political issue.

Media Literacy in China

The lives of today's Chinese children have been increasingly affected by new media. Official statistics suggest that China has more than 1,000 radio stations, 2,200 newspapers, 3,000 TV stations, 8,000 magazines, and 371,600 Chinese language Web sites (Xinhua, 2004). China's Web savvy population is second in the world after the United States (Internet World Stat, 2007). Similar, if not greater, concerns about children and media use exist in China. Chinese parents seek professional help for their children who are addicted to the Internet and neglect their schoolwork (Xinhua, 2004). In fact, the Internet is sometimes accused of being "an evil force, no less dangerous than drugs to young kids" (Xinhua, 2004, p. 3). Research also points out that very few Chinese TV programs for children deal with traditional Chinese culture (Xinhua, 2004), and that mass media is criticized for marginalizing and undermining traditional Chinese values. Commercials on TV and the Internet are criticized for touting materialism, as well as carrying potentially obscene and violent messages.

Since 2004, in response to calls to protect minors, law enforcement agencies in China have launched nationwide campaigns to uproot harmful information on the Internet. Internet cafes were shut down if they failed to keep minors off their premises. Chinese Web sites containing cyber violence and pornographic content have been

penalized and shut down. Chinese Web sites all carry alert buttons for surfers to inform the Web master of any harmful information on the site.

The question becomes, "Which is more effective: legislation or education? Or both?: We believe, in this case, that media literacy education is more effective than top-down government controls and legislations. By teaching children media literacy skills, educators provide them with life-long learning and living skills that will be needed for the 21st century. There is a need to develop curriculum for media literacy awareness for millions of Chinese youths and adults. However, no officially designated courses on media literacy have been included in the curriculum of any educational institution across the country in China. The absence of governmental policy on media education, the heavy workload under the current school curriculum for students, the absence of professional development for teachers in media literacy, and a shortage of funds for schools are likely major obstacles to the development of media literacy education at the grass-roots level in China.

Our decision to focus on the current media use of children from the United States and China is driven by their unique differences and remarkable similarities. The two countries are completely different with regard to political systems, geography, language, and educational philosophy. Other major differences: one represents Eastern and the other Western culture; one is developed and the other is a still developing country. Both countries have similarities in size, and each has the potential to exert global impact. One represents a superpower in many ways and the other a super population.

Finally, children on both sides of the Pacific Ocean live in the same age of rapid technological advancement. The Internet World Stats (2007) reported that the United States and China have the greatest number of Internet users in the world. Nearly 19%, or 211 million, of the Internet users in the world are in the United States; 12.3%, or 137 million, users are in China. With all of their differences and similarities, we sought to explore similarities and differences in how children in these two countries use media,

and whether the two countries display similar needs for media literacy education in their schools.

As stated earlier, young people today live media-saturated lives, spending many hours daily on media (Roberts et al., 2005). Therefore, it is important to consider which media adolescents are spending their time with, and approximately how much time they are allocating to each type of media.

Media Use

According to the NCTE (2007), the use of technology at all levels of education in the United States is growing. More than 80% of kindergartners use computers and more than 50% of children under the age of 9 use the Internet. At the university level, almost 50% of 4-year colleges and 30% of community colleges make use of course management tools, and there are approximately 61 virtual college/university options available. Overall, the U. S. ranks 15th in the percentage of households subscribing to a broadband Internet service, enabling at least 91 million Google searches each day. There were 158.6 billion text messages in 2006, and over 106 million registered users of MySpace (NCTE, 2007).

The Kaiser Family Foundation's national survey (Roberts et al., 2005) found children 8–18 years old are spending an increasing amount of time using new media like computers, the Internet, and video games, without cutting back on the time they spend with old media like TV, print, and music. They use more than one media at the same time. DeBell and Chapman (2006) reported that home computers are used to play games (56%), work on school assignments (47%), and connect to the Internet (45%).

Data from one of the largest national studies of children's media use in China, which surveyed 955 Chinese students (7–12 grades) in Beijing, Dalian, Taiyuan, and Yangquan (Wan, 2005), the Kaiser Family Foundation survey (Roberts et al., 2005), and a U.S. Department of Education study (DeBell & Chapman, 2006) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Adolescent Media Use by Type

Media Use	United States	China
Video gaming	91%	47%
> 30 min	23%	14%
Television viewing	99%	99%
> 30 min	77%	39%
Print	74%	87%
> 30 min	27%	40%
Computer use	92.3%	92%
> 30 min	16.3%	22%
Computer access	85%	78%
Internet access	80%	66%

This table provides insights into some interesting trends that lead to potential implications for educators, parents, and the adolescents themselves. Areas for continued exploration and research are addressed in the following sections.

Discussion and Implications

The data clearly show that adolescents in both China and the United States are using media for similar purposes and they are dedicating a growing amount of their waking hours to interacting with media. Parents and other adults in both countries have expressed concerns regarding the impact or potential negative outcomes associated with increased media use by children and adolescents. Interestingly, only a little more than half of the adolescents in both countries reported parental rules for media use (55% for U.S. and 59% for China). It may be, as Roberts et al., (2005) suggested, that “the majority of parents either don’t feel their children spend too much time with media, or that they have simply given up” (p. 60). Conversely, they also determined that, “parents who have kept media out of their children’s bedrooms, who turn off the TV during meals, who set (and enforce) rules about media use in general and TV in particular, tend to be parents whose children spend substantially less time with electronic media and more time reading” (p. 60).

Given the high percentage of media-use by adolescents, it is clear that educators and parents in both countries have a two-fold responsibility. First, they must educate young people in the appropriate and ethical use of media. Second, they must find creative and interesting ways to utilize new media in the classroom to take advantage of students’ interest in, and continued use of, media. We believe that both of these goals will be effectively addressed when parents and teachers in the two countries join hands to discuss various aspects of media literacy education with children at home and in schools.

In brief, media literacy is the ability to interpret and create personal meaning from the many verbal and visual symbols that people take in. It is the ability to choose, to challenge and question, and to use the media actively and consciously for one’s own purposes (Pena, Lam, & Adiele, 2007).

Critical media literacy education may begin with Thoman’s (1995) three stages. The first stage involves making wise choices and managing time spent on media. Children can learn to be selective about their media use by selecting, beforehand, what TV programs to watch, rather than sitting down and being randomly fed by TV for hours. They can be taught to check TV program schedules to help select their favorite shows.

In stage two, children develop specific skills of critical viewing and surfing. Learning how to tell what information is more reliable than others is especially important because nobody really owns the Internet and anyone with the proper skills can create a Web site. Children need to know that information from Web sites that have not been updated for a long time, that do not show who the owners are, and that contain many grammatical errors are not good sources for school work. Information from official Web sites like *Encyclopedia Britannica’s* are more reliable than information from Wikipedia. Comparing several resources is another good way to verify information.

Nowadays, with digital manipulations and technology, seeing is no longer believing. Children need to learn to question digital images

and pictures that they encounter. Making choices also includes understanding online safety issues and proper behaviors online. Children should be informed never talk to strangers online, the same as in the real world, nor to ever give out their real names or contact information online. Also, children should understand that it is important to behave in the virtual world in the same way as in the real world.

As most people know, media use can become very addictive and distract individuals from other important activities in their lives; time management of media use is important for children to learn. Some home rules, such as homework before TV or video games, 1 hr on-line time during weekdays, or turning the TV off during dinner time, may help children better manage their media use. Keeping a balance between reading books (online or in print) and media use is another good practice to teach children.

Analyzing and questioning what is shown, how it is made, and what may have been left out and why from media are specific critical media literacy skills (Thoman, 1995). Understanding that the purpose of product placements (putting products or logos in shows) is for viewers to see the products and want to buy them is another media literacy skill. For example, some 20 products were carefully placed throughout the movie *Spider-Man*, who wore Nike shoes and drank Dr Pepper (Baker, 2007). Playing *Sims Online* lets you see logos of Intel and McDonalds (Andersen, 2007). Teachers may ask children to pay attention to product placements next time they watch a movie.

Thoman's (1995) third stage poses questions like who produces the media, and for what purposes, to teach children to explore deeper issues of media making. Understanding that all media producers need to make money to stay in business helps children see the logic of millions of ads in TV shows. It is important for children to understand the concept that there is no such thing as *value-free* media. Teachers may help children understand this concept by pointing out how media messages inform, entertain, persuade, and give people ideas, all of which influence their thoughts and decisions. "Messages on media try

to tell us what to think, how to act, and how to feel" (Wan, 2007, p. 5). Stereotypes is a value that media promote. The nerdy smart kid, the not-so-smart blonde, and the street-wise black friend are some examples (Wan, 2007). Children need to learn to question the ideas and values presented in the media before buying into them. These questions help children to become mature, critical users of media.

By nature, media literacy encourages an interdisciplinary approach to education and is a natural extension of the existing school curriculum. Thus, teachers do not need to worry about adding a new subject to the crowded curriculum. They may address media literacy education by teaching with and about media literacy through their normal classroom interactions (Wan, 2006). For example, in an English classroom, when one asks students to compare *Mulan*, the Disney movie, with the original Chinese story, *The Legend of Mulan*, one teaches critical reading skills, comparing and contrasting, comprehension, drawing conclusions, decoding, and logical reasoning skills at the same time.

When students discuss and write Internet safety rules, they practice writing skills and use art to convey meanings. When students create digital stories, they learn to create with multimedia tools and write scripts of their own. When a new sports drink made the claim on television that three out of four children interviewed love it, teachers can ask children, "What about the thousands of other children not interviewed?"

Health and physical education may be easily integrated with media literacy education. Personal health is a natural extension of discussions about commercials for healthy snacks, exercise machines, dental care products, tobacco, and alcohol. Conversations on how unrealistic the extra-slim or muscle-bound images portrayed in the media are may help prevent eating disorders among adolescents.

Art education and media literacy go hand-in-hand. Discussions can address what techniques are used to attract one's attention in a television program and newspaper ad. How does digital technology create virtual reality? How is a television program filmed with cameras? Why is

seeing not believing anymore with digital manipulation? Knowledge of the arts helps students to answer these questions. Techniques, styles, and art media can be taught with various media literacy units when illustrations and artwork are required (Wan, 2006).

Teachers empower students by nurturing their higher-order thinking skills. This goal of education is supported by media literacy because teaching students how to use critical thinking skills to understand, analyze, and evaluate media, as well as to make smart choices, are the major purposes of media literacy education and the skills needed for life in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Adolescents in both China and the United States are spending a great amount of their time using a variety of media, which offers strong support for the need to include media literacy education as an integral and integrated component in the academic curriculum. Kathy Krauth (cited in Weeks, 2007) said that the Eye Generation feels more comfortable expressing themselves in visual form. Now teachers are trying to harness that energy of the eye by using visual media such as television, movies, video games, photography, and Facebooking both to engage this eye-curious culture and to help students think critically about what they see (Weeks, 2007).

Through media literacy education, people help children deal with information overload and find ways to steer them away from less desirable content and uses of media. Media literacy education courses help children become media literate, enabling them to sort through and find meaning in the daily media barrage (Pena et al., 2007).

Further studies should address adolescents' access to, and use of, the newest media (e. g., I-pods, Internet messenger services, cell phones, Nintendo Wii). Studies should continue to explore techniques that educators and parents are currently using and document new and innovative uses for new and developing technologies designed to enhance student learning. Professional development for teachers to learn to integrate

media literacy education into their existing curriculum will also be very helpful.

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