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New media and online literacies: No age left behind

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Issue 1. Who is affected by new media and online literacies?

Research addressing the uses of new media and online technologies is often situated in relation to youngsters' lives. It's not uncommon to read about a 2-year-old's interaction with computerized story-books (Smith, 2001) or a 5-year-old Web designer (Lankshear & Knobel, 1997). Documentation of elementary school age students' text uses runs the gamut from their own video productions (Grace & Tobin, 1998) and online research inquiries (Owens, Hester, & Teale, 2002) to development of computing skills in conjunction with writing in literacy centers (Labbo, 1996). From literacy practices involving rap music (Hagood, 2001) to instant messaging conversations (Lewis & Fabos, 2000) to the creation and negotiations of Web texts in computer labs (O'Brien, 2001) and the world of online gaming (Katz, 2001; Turkle, 1995), adolescents have also been studied to learn about how they incorporate media into their repertoire of literacy. These are only a few examples of a growing body of research focusing on youngsters' media and online literacies. Across such writings, implications continuously call for adults' attention to youngsters' burgeoning literacies so as to make education more relevant to students' lives, to develop productive citizenry, and to motivate struggling readers.

Though these implications are indeed important for focusing on new communication technologies in today's media-saturated world, what is often ignored is the import of media and online literacies in our own lives and to our identities as researchers, teacher educators, and adults. In other words, not only is it important to examine the role of new media and online literacies in youngsters' lives, but it is also crucial, I believe, for reading researchers and teachers to be interested in media and online literacies because

these literacies affect us, too. For instance, teacher educators must consider media and online literacies in the courses they teach. Textbook adoptions involve more than just choosing a primary text for class instruction. They now often include interactive CDs and linked websites to enhance learning and availability of information. Web CT, PowerPoint, listserv discussions, video productions, instructors' websites, wireless Internet connections, and Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) also affect classroom instruction, interaction, and text use among teachers and students in colleges and universities.

Researchers too are affected by new media and online literacies, which inundate their work. Comprehensive database searches, access to virtual online communities, e-mail dialogue journals with collaborators (other researchers or participants), and new media tools such as voice-recognition software that organizes data and tracking devices that show edits in text writing are just a few examples of the ways that new technologies have changed reading researchers' work, both in *what* they research and *how* they research it.

Because new media and online literacies are part and parcel of our day-to-day lives, reading researchers and educators need to begin to view them as a central aspect of literacy research. This means that new media and online literacies can no longer be considered only what youth "do" to the exclusion of what adults "do" or as an "add on" to the field of reading (e.g., an extracurricular topic to be explored in schools or studied in research if and when time allows and only after "real reading" takes place or as a "hook" to engage disinterested students in school-based literacy practices). New media and online literacies belong to and affect people of all ages. These literacies and their related practices should be recognized as literacy venues that have evolved concurrently with broadened definitions and understandings of terms such as *texts* and *reading* in the

field of reading and in relation to other disciplines that study reading behaviors, including media and communication studies and cultural studies.

Issue 2. Affecting the researched and the researcher

Indeed, the functions and forms of media and online literacies are propelling changes in the ways that research is conducted. Overall shifts in theoretical perspectives regarding audiences' uses of texts as well as data-gathering capabilities inherently available within media and online texts themselves have potential to generate new directions for research and new forms of data in these areas. A long-standing area of research addressing audiences' text uses in other fields has influenced many reading researchers interested in media and online literacies (cf. Hall, 1980; Hoggart, 1958; Willis, 1974). Audiences' engagement of texts in new and different ways has pushed the concept of *active audiencing*, which calls into question transmission models that position readers as passive receivers of information and meanings marketed toward particular audiences. Reading researchers who draw upon theories such as reception theory, poststructural theories, or cultural studies have begun to view audiences as their own creators of text uses rather than as solely recipients of predetermined and produced media messages (cf. Alvermann, Moon, & Hagoood, 1999; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Fisherkeller, 1997; Tobin, 2000). These theoretical frameworks as situated within a larger perspective of media literacy reiterate the notion that the meaning of a text is not transparent but is constantly in movement and dependent upon readers' uses of texts. Given the emphasis on *uses of texts* rather than on *meaning of texts*, Ang (1996) noted that "fundamental uncertainty" erupts from efforts to determine textual meaning. As she explained, "communicative practices do not necessarily have to arrive at common meanings at all" (p. 166). Situating their work within a framework of multiple realities, Labbo and Reinking (1999) discussed similar open-ended possibilities of post-typographic texts, which add to the complexity of understanding how readers use texts to make sense of their worlds.

The emphasis on text uses over text meaning is significant for reading research. By acknowledging that users are not passive recipients of media messages, researchers interested in media and online literacies have begun to view users differently. Because

readers actively engage in their text uses, researchers have become interested in the ways that readers use texts differently. Some researchers have begun to focus on the readers' innovations for creating new ways of being, new constructions and notions of themselves, while simultaneously being produced as a particular kind of person based upon their text selection.

In short, the shifts toward views of media and online texts as dynamic and indeterminate have forced researchers to begin to examine *both* production and consumption of texts in order to understand better how media and online literacies assist readers to facilitate particular ends. Discussions of production and consumption of media text are often central to the work of media and cultural studies (Lusted, 1991; Storey, 1998). Johnson (1987) theoretically outlined how production and consumption play out for audiences. Explaining the "circuit of production and consumption," Johnson noted that "the circuit is, at one and the same time, a circuit of capital and its expanded reproduction and a circuit of the production and circulation of subjective forms" (p. 47). This quotation as it applies to those interested in reading research calls attention to the circuit of communication in literacy: The meanings made of and from new media and online technological texts within the circuit must account for the ways that readers both shape and are shaped by those texts.

The perspective that texts have no meaning and are indeterminate until readers ascribe uses to them will affect the ways that research is conceptualized in the areas of new media and online literacies. Researchers interested in the active audience and conscientious of the circuit of production and consumption must foreground readers' ongoing construction of meaning and move away from an *assumption* of transparent textual meaning (of the text acting upon the reader). Certainly connections between reader, text, and context as noted by Mackey, Leander, and Nixon (later in this issue) will be paramount to such research endeavors and will render glimpses of readers' media and online text uses. However, central to these investigations from critical perspectives, researchers need also to consider how readers use texts as cultural capital and as a means to appeal to particular identities, to subvert and change identities, and to construct new subject positions for themselves. A focus on the production and consumption of texts might include studies that investigate both the marketing strategies employed to create texts according to audience demographics and interest criteria gleaned from focus group input

(see <http://www.look-look.com>) and the audiences' self-created uses of texts unintended by marketers. These studies of production and consumption necessitate researchers' attention to the circulation of power among readers, as readers actively construct uses of text while they are concurrently being "produced" with particular identities. I imagine that new uses of media and online literacies will be documented and novel directions for reading research will germinate in this multidimensional virtual space where readers engage tactically and peripatetically, explicitly and tacitly, and where they are simultaneously produced with certain identities and construct uses of texts for and of themselves and others.

Layered data collection and analyses that dissect the reader, text, and context in the larger circuit of production and consumption are noteworthy to researchers interested in active audiencing. Albeit time consuming, multileveled and detailed analyses that concentrate on readers' shifting notions of themselves and others might move the field into new conceptualizations of the researcher and researched, of the teacher and student, and of assumed generational demarcations of readers' media and online literacy text uses. Detailed analyses of readers' text uses across contexts illustrate the tensions that result from being produced as a particular kind of person based upon one's assumptions about particular texts and from readers' own constructions of self that contradict the identities produced for them (Hagood, 2002). Analyses that focus on readers' uses of texts within the circuit of production and consumption may aid in reformulations of identity formation and of constructions of self that reveal how audiences' uses of texts shift and change instantaneously dependent upon their purposes. Such research needs to address an array of multiaged readers in various contexts using texts with different audiences (see Hagood, Stevens, & Reinking, 2002, for case study comparisons of multiaged readers). By forcing close examinations of text uses across generational users, researchers will begin to document how the circuit of production and consumption plays out among readers of various ages.

Furthermore, researchers who attempt to explore research questions that address how new media and online literacies affect youngsters' constructions of identities and notions of self need also to apply such questions to themselves as they engage these same media technologies in their lives. If researchers do not recognize how new media and online literacies affect notions of themselves and their perceptions of others, then they will unintentionally reify the effects paradigm, which implicates youngsters as

susceptible to media and online literacies to the exclusion that these very literacies also affect all users—without age discrimination. Lack of acknowledgment of the ways that media and online literacies affect users across ages (both the researched and the researcher) weakens researchers' arguments that audiences are active in their text uses. Furthermore, different conceptualizations of readers' text uses (as active audiences) and attention to text uses across age groups will also affect how research on new media and online literacies will be conducted. Research study implications will serve applicably toward all age levels and groups of readers, rather than as suggestions by adult researchers made for the benefit of the young and researched. Ultimately, it is not enough to focus only on the reader, the text, and the context. The trio needs to be conceptualized in a multidimensional fashion as they play out in a larger sphere of production and consumption as audiences choose and use texts.

Issue 3. Conceptualizing the medium in the media

Aware of rapidly evolving technological advances that have forced us to become readers of printed text, signs, and imagery, literacy educators have begun advocating for and researching an expanded notion of text that extends beyond traditional print-based reading and writing. These more expansive views of *text* and of *reading* have in the past decade or so become more central to the field of reading research and literacy studies. Resulting from a broadened conception of what counts as text (Flood & Lapp, 1995) and what is considered reading (Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr, 2000), reading researchers have begun to develop areas of study concerned with expanded definitions of literacy. Multiple literacies—including school, personal, and community literacies (Gallego & Hollingsworth, 1992, 2000) and visual forms of communication (Flood, Heath, & Lapp, 1997; Hobbs, 1997)—have been conceptualized in a variety of ways, as new literacies (Bruce, 1998), multi-literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996), digital literacies (Alvermann, 2002; Sefton-Green, 1998), and new media and popular culture (Alvermann et al., 1999; Buckingham, 1998; Howard, 1998).

New media and online literacies might seem like an innovative area of study. Yet previous work conducted in the broader fields of media studies,

mass communication, film, and cultural studies (Kellner, 1995; McRobbie, 1994; Redhead, Wynne, & O'Connor, 2002) has paved the way for the directions literacy researchers are attempting to take in this area. New media and online literacies that encompass communicative media and popular culture such as television, the Internet, or music, for example, have been readily accepted and used within the field of media studies and cultural studies research. Until recently, however, this broadened definition of text and of literacies has been excluded from the field of literacy research (Kamil et al., 2000). Only within the past 10 years has a wider description of literacies been accepted in reading research. This wider conceptualization has resulted in research about technological media (Leu & Kinzer, 2000; Reinking, McKenna, Labbo, & Kieffer, 1998), readings of multiple sign systems (Hamilton, 2000; Tierney, 1997), and experimentation with visual literacies (Messaris, 2001; Whipple, 1998). *Reading* within literacy education has come to be conceptualized within a multimedia environment (Adoni, 1995; Bruce, 1997).

Although views of literacies as plural and contingent upon various text media and contextual use seem to be catching on in the field of reading research, definitions of literacy that are broader than reading and writing (and speaking and listening) and culturally and contextually bound (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanĭc, 2000) are still contested terrain (Street, 1999). Much work still lies ahead for reading researchers and teacher educators. If researchers within the field of reading plan to make significant contributions to research on media and online literacies so as to influence other fields (e.g., mass communication, film studies) then the notions of reading and text defined broadly within the 21st century must become an underlying premise of our work rather than one for which we must continually argue.

Issue 4. Crossing fields and media

Discussing differences between a traditional definition of text and literacy and a newer formulation of texts and literacies, Sefton-Green (1998) declared,

Indeed, interacting with a game or other digital texts, from CD-ROMs to online World Wide Web sites, is qualitatively different from the relations between reader and writer in the domain of print literacy.... If a fixed relation between writer

and reader is the hallmark of the old literacy then an interactive dynamic is at the heart of the new literacies. (p. 10)

Old and new perspectives regarding literacies need to be studied and shared in interdisciplinary ways. Bound up in this molding of old and new perspectives of literacies are issues of user/reader/producer/consumer identity and subjectivity, which are tied to "old" and "new" assumptions of types and forms of literacy as well as to assumptions that others hold about users and how users see themselves. In order to move the field of reading research forward, researchers need to examine the ways that old and new ideas merge and clash across contexts. It is important therefore to examine both the production and consumption of media and online communication of all users—not just of youth. In an age when adults and youngsters are concurrently learning how to use new media and online technologies, research on the topic needs to address multiple perspectives of users and uses. Such study entails the use of various theoretical perspectives like the coupling of cultural studies with media studies and poststructural theory, for example. Taking on mainstay ideas about singular models of media and literacy from different disciplinary studies may assist in rethinking forms of production and consumption that acknowledge readers' diverse text uses.

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