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**Title:** A constructivist approach to media literacy education: The role of the library

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**Abstract**

An informed citizenry is essential to the effective functioning of democracy. In most modern liberal democracies, citizens have traditionally looked to the media as the primary source of information about socio-political matters. In our increasingly mediated world, it is critical that audiences be able to effectively and accurately use the media to meet their information needs. Media literacy, the ability to access, understand, evaluate and create media content is therefore a vital skill for a healthy democracy.

The past three decades have seen the rapid expansion of the information environment, particularly through Internet technologies. It is obvious that media usage patterns have changed dramatically as a result. Blogs and websites are now popular sources of news and information, and are for some sections of the population likely to be the first, and possibly only, information source accessed when information is required.

What are the implications for media literacy in such a diverse and changing information environment? The Alexandria Manifesto stresses the link between libraries, a well informed citizenry and effective governance, so how do these changes impact on libraries? This paper considers the role libraries can play in developing media literate communities, and explores the ways in which traditional media literacy training may be expanded to better equip citizens for new media technologies.

Drawing on original empirical research, this paper highlights a key shortcoming of existing media literacy approaches: that of overlooking the importance of needs identification as an initial step in media selection. Self-awareness of one's actual information need is not automatic, as can be witnessed daily at reference desks in libraries the world over. Citizens very often do not know what it is that they need when it comes to information. Without this knowledge, selecting the most appropriate information source from the vast range available becomes an uncertain, possibly even random, enterprise. Incorporating reference interview-type training into media literacy education, whereby the individual will develop the skills to interrogate

themselves regarding their underlying information needs, will enhance media literacy approaches. This increased focus on the needs of the individual will also push media literacy education into a more constructivist methodology.

The paper also stresses the importance of media literacy training for adults. Media literacy education received in school or even university cannot be expected to retain its relevance over time in our rapidly evolving information environment. Further, constructivist teaching approaches highlight the importance of context to the learning process, thus it may be more effective to offer media literacy education relating to news media use to adults, whilst school-based approaches focus on types of media more relevant to young people, such as entertainment media.

Librarians are ideally placed to offer such community-based media literacy education for adults. They already understand, through their training and practice of the reference interview, how to identify underlying information needs. Further, libraries are placed within community contexts, where the everyday practice of media literacy occurs. The Alexandria Manifesto stresses the link between libraries, a well informed citizenry and effective governance. It is clear that libraries have a role to play in fostering media literacy within their communities.

## Introduction

An informed citizenry is essential to the effective functioning of democracy (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Jones, 2004; Lippmann, 1913, as cited in Kuklinski, 1990). In most modern liberal democracies, citizens have traditionally looked to the media as the primary source of information about socio-political matters (Chadwick, 1998; Jones, 2005; Pinkleton & Austin, 2002; Ward, 2006), to the extent that the news media are often considered “an indispensable part of a modern democratic system” (Ladd, 2006, p5). In our increasingly mediated world, it is critical that audiences be able to effectively and accurately use the media to meet their information needs. Media literacy, “the ability to access, understand, evaluate and create media content” (European Commission, 2007), is therefore viewed as a vital skill for a healthy democracy.

The past three decades have seen the rapid development of a wide range of new information technologies, such as SMS, email and Web2.0, which have significantly expanded the range of information sources available to most citizens of the West. Simultaneous with this increasing complexity in the information environment has been a fairly dramatic loss of faith in the traditional mainstream media in many countries. For example, over the past 30 years confidence in the media has declined steeply in the USA (Gronke & Cook, 2007), while in annual surveys in the UK over the past five years, fewer than 20% of people state that they trust the press (European Commission, 2008). Similarly, my own recent Australian research revealed that only 12% of respondents believed the mainstream media could be trusted.

Alongside, or perhaps driving, this loss of faith in the media, has been a very public barrage of criticisms of the media from academics and public intellectuals. In Australia for example, concerns have been raised about the increasing tabloidization of ‘serious’ news media (Beecher, 2005; Chadwick, 1998; Turner, 2005). and the effect of corporate agendas on media content diversity (Beecher, 2007; Chadwick, 1998; Lewis, 2001). Media censorship by both interventionist media moguls and the government has also been alleged (Ester, 2007; Hamilton & Maddison, 2007; Manne, 2005; Tiffen, 2006; Ward, 2006). In short, belief in a general decline in the quality of journalism appears to be widespread. This belief, combined with the diverse array of new media sources, and ever-declining newspaper circulation rates have resulted in dire predictions of the death of the newspaper (Gillin, 2006; Ives, 2008).

Whether traditional media forms such as newspapers are in fact in their death throes or not, it is obvious that media usage patterns have changed as a result of some or probably all of the factors outlined above. Blogs and websites are now popular sources of news and information, and anecdotal evidence suggests that for some sections of the population they are likely to be the first, possibly only, information source accessed when information is required.

The Alexandria Manifesto stresses the link between libraries, a well informed citizenry and effective governance (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2006). So what are the implications for media literacy in our diverse and changing information environment, and how do they impact on libraries? This paper considers the role libraries can play in developing media literate communities,

and explores the ways in which traditional media literacy training may be expanded to better equip citizens for new media technologies.

### **What is media literacy?**

Media literacy is commonly defined as “the ability to access, understand, evaluate and create media content” (European Commission, 2007). It is traditionally viewed as a type of critical literacy (Buckingham, 2003), which enables citizens to understand the implicit ideologies, agendas and contexts of the media discourses they encounter (Andersen, 2006; Warnick, 2002). The goal of media literacy may be stated as promoting a healthy scepticism towards the media (Kealy, 2004; Thoman & Jolls, 2004), so that media literate citizens question the images and messages presented to them, rather than simply accepting those messages at face value (Gillmor, 2008). Scepticism is so integral to media literacy that media literacy education has been used specifically to increase media scepticism amongst specific audiences, such as those viewed as vulnerable to the negative effects of body image and alcohol advertising (Austin, Chen, & Grube, 2006; Irving & Berel, 2001).

In developed nations, new media pervade almost every aspect of our lives, and this ubiquitousness means media literacy must be increasingly viewed as a socially situated practice (Penman & Turnbull, 2007). It is not enough to think about media literacy whilst reading the Sunday newspaper. Rather, media literacy skills must be able to be performed in any context, using any media, at any time (Thoman & Jolls, 2004).

Media literacy is not only a practice in itself, but leads to further practices. Specifically, it enables citizens to take particular types of social action (Buckingham, 2003). Indeed, the ultimate purpose of media literacy is commonly seen by practitioners and researchers as enabling active citizenship (Penman & Turnbull, 2007). Prominent researcher in the area, Sonia Livingstone, goes so far as to assert that “debates over [media] literacy are, in short, debates about the manner and purposes of public participation in society” (Livingstone, 2004, p20). Indeed, UNESCO states that their Media Education Programme “seeks to establish new ways by which all members of society, but especially young people, can actively participate in the political and cultural life of the general community through the media” (UNESCO, 2007).

It is typically envisioned that media literacy skills will better equip citizens to participate in the social and political lives of their communities by ensuring they are well-informed about important socio-political issues, such as social movements or the actions of their governments. In democratic countries, such informed participation forms the cornerstone of a healthy democracy and a “sophisticated, critical and inclusive public sphere” (Berelson et al., 1954, p7). It is for this reason that both UNESCO and the European Commission (EC) view media literacy education as part of the fundamental right of all citizens to information, as well as an instrument with which to build and sustain democracy (European Commission, 2007; Penman & Turnbull, 2007).

## Media literacy and media diets

Early approaches to media literacy tended to view the mass media as dangerous, particularly to children, and focussed on protecting children from its harms (Domaille & Buckingham, 2001; Rogow, 2004). Stemming from this viewpoint is the idea that certain media are 'good' and others 'bad', an opinion still held by some researchers. This good/bad distinction is typically, in the case of children's media use, based on factors such as levels of violence, portrayals of body image and representations of vulnerable social groups (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009). Another factor commonly used to judge media product is commercial interests which underpin media production, with commercial media often viewed as 'bad'. Strasburger *et al* go so far as to refer to the largest commercial media organisations collectively as 'Big Media', likening them to Big Tobacco in their apparently nefarious approaches to media production and promotion (Strasburger et al., 2009).

In the arena of news media, distinctions are also made around commercialisation, with publicly owned media tending to be viewed as of higher quality than commercial media (Ang, Brand, Noble, & Sternberg, 2006; Bean, 2004; Turner, 2005). Discussions of "media diets" are typically based on these types of evaluations. The term "media diet" refers to the composition of an individual's media consumption patterns. For example, a media diet may be measured by considering the ratio of commercial media sources to public media sources used by an individual. Using this media literacy perspective, one would expect that media literate individuals would have a media diet higher in 'healthy' (good quality/ publicly owned/ broadsheet) media, and lower in 'unhealthy' (low quality/ commercial/ tabloid) media.

As stated previously, the goal of media literacy is to create a healthy scepticism amongst audiences towards the media. In March 2008, as part of the data collection phase of my PhD, I conducted a postal survey to learn whether such scepticism towards the media influenced the political media diets of adults<sup>1</sup>. Media diets were measured in a number of ways, the most relevant to the current discussion being the Private/Public Media Diet and the Tabloid/Broadsheet Media Diet. These were calculated as follows:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Private/Public} \\ \text{Media Diet} \end{array} = \frac{\text{(# of privately owned} \\ \text{media sources 'usually} \\ \text{used' to find out about} \\ \text{politics)}}{\text{(# of publicly owned} \\ \text{information sources} \\ \text{'usually used' to find out} \\ \text{about politics)}} \\ \\ \text{Tabloid/Broadsheet} \\ \text{Media Diet} = \frac{\text{(# of tabloid media} \\ \text{sources 'usually} \\ \text{used' to find out} \\ \text{about politics)}}{\text{(# of quality} \\ \text{information sources} \\ \text{'usually used' to find} \\ \text{out about politics)}}\end{array}$$

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<sup>1</sup> The survey population for the research project was the adult population of Brisbane, the third largest Australian city with a population of approximately two million. A probability sample of 1,500 individuals was drawn from the Australian Electoral Roll. 585 usable replies were received.

In contrast to the expectations outlined above, statistical linear regression performed on the survey data revealed that the influence of media scepticism on media usage patterns was negligible, with factors such as age, political partisanship and gender appearing to have a much greater influence on media diets.

In total, the predictor variables accounted for 17.8% of the variance in the Private/Public Media Diet variable, and 18.7% of the variance in the Tabloid/Broadsheet Media Diet variable. Tables 1 and 2 provide details of specific predictor variable scores. Bold type indicates factors which have a greater impact on media diet than media scepticism does.

**Table 1: Regressing Private/Public Media Diet on Media Scepticism, Age, Partisanship, Political Interest and Gender**

<b>Predictors</b>	<b>Standardized Beta Coefficient</b>	<b>Sig. (p)</b>
Media Scepticism	-.111	<.01
Age* 26-35	-.005	n.s.
<b>Age 36-45</b>	<b>-.119</b>	<.05
<b>Age 46-55</b>	<b>-.181</b>	<.01
<b>Age 56-65</b>	<b>-.201</b>	<.01
<b>Age 66-75</b>	<b>-.172</b>	<.01
<b>Age 76+</b>	<b>-.115</b>	<.05
Labor Party supporter**	.011	n.s.
<b>Liberal Party supporter</b>	<b>.128</b>	<.05
<b>Minor left-wing party supporter</b>	<b>-.139</b>	<.01
Minor right-wing party supporter	.024	n.s.
Not much interest in politics***	.023	n.s.
Some interest in politics	.019	n.s.
A good deal of interest in politics	-.192	n.s.
<b>Gender</b>	<b>-.148</b>	<.001

\*Age 16-25 was the control age group

\*\*No party affiliation was the control group

\*\*\*No interest in politics was the control group

**Table 2: Regressing Tabloid/Broadsheet Media Diet on Media Scepticism, Age, Partisanship, Political Interest and Gender**

<b>Predictors</b>	<b>Standardized Beta Coefficient</b>	<b>Sig. (p)</b>
Media Scepticism	.022	<.01
<b>Age* 26-35</b>	<b>.116</b>	n.s.
Age 36-45	.026	<.05
Age 46-55	.038	n.s.
Age 56-65	.030	n.s.
Age 66-75	.001	n.s.
Age 76+	.005	n.s.
Labor Party supporter**	.006	n.s.
Liberal Party supporter	.017	n.s.

Minor left-wing party supporter	-.082	n.s.
Minor right-wing party supporter	.023	n.s.
Not much interest in politics***	.046	n.s.
Some interest in politics	-.180	n.s.
<b>A good deal of interest in politics</b>	<b>-.476</b>	<b>&lt;.001</b>
Gender	-.041	n.s.

\*Age 16-25 was the control age group

\*\*No party affiliation was the control group

\*\*\*No interest in politics was the control group

If scepticism, a key characteristic of the media literate citizen, does not result in increased reliance on 'better quality' news media, then we must ask ourselves what is going on? Are media literate citizens really no more discerning than those without media literacy skills? Or does the 'good' versus 'bad' media distinction fail to capture some other aspect of media use? This issue will be explored later in the paper. First however, I will provide a brief overview of the main contemporary contexts for media literacy education.

### **Contexts of media literacy education: Young people**

Media literacy education occurs in a range of contexts. To date, the research and practice of media literacy education within developed nations has predominantly focused on younger people and been situated within formal educational institutions, such as universities and schools (Dennis, 2004; O'Neill, 2008). Australia, New Zealand and Canada are viewed as the most advanced nations in terms of media literacy education (Domaille & Buckingham, 2001; European Commission, n.d.), with media literacy incorporated into the standard school curricula of each of these countries. For example, media literacy education has been a compulsory part of the Australian K-12 school curriculum since the mid-1990s (Kubey, 2003).

In general, the approach of school-based media literacy programs has moved from one of protecting children from the perceived perils of the mass media, to one of audience empowerment (Domaille & Buckingham, 2001; Rogow, 2004). Within this approach, a variety of perspectives may be seen in schools around the world. For example, in Spain and Denmark the focus is on developing an active citizenry, in Sweden the focus is on personal expression (Domaille & Buckingham, 2001), while Singapore places an emphasis on Internet safety for young people (European Commission, n.d.). Specific approaches can also vary. For example, a 2001 global survey of school-based media literacy education revealed that whilst most countries had a focus on the critical aspects of media literacy, some, such as Japan, instead emphasized functional aspects, with the aim of rapidly developing a competitive workforce in new technologies (Domaille & Buckingham, 2001).

In developing nations, media literacy education understandably takes a back seat to basic literacy education. Where media literacy is taught, formal initiatives may be conducted by non-governmental organizations (eg. church groups) or within school curricula. A key exception is Latin America, where it is believed that innovative, informal media literacy education is conducted through community programs, although the informal nature of these initiatives makes it difficult to gather information



on them (Domaille & Buckingham, 2001). Often formal programs are transplanted more or less directly from media literacy initiatives created in and for Western nations, with issues of cultural and contextual relevance arising as a result (Domaille & Buckingham, 2001).

### **Contexts of media literacy education: Adults**

While school-based approaches to media literacy education dominate the literature, the continual evolution of the media sector, encompassing both rapid technological advancements (eg. Web 2.0), and more gradual structural changes (eg. market changes, media policy changes), highlights the need for community-based, adult media literacy initiatives (Dennis, 2004; Thoman & Jolls, 2004). Media literacy training received in high school or even university cannot be expected to retain its relevancy or usefulness in the long-term for citizens in such a fluid environment.

It is also possible that school-based media literacy education may be less effective than adult approaches when relating to certain types of media. Constructivist approaches to learning focus on the transformation of information into knowledge through the construction of meaning (Jordan, Carlile, & Stack, 2008). Constructivists therefore highlight the importance of context and relevance in the learning process, as these are vital to meaning construction – in order to create knowledge, new information must be connected to our existing knowledge or experience base, or meet our personal knowledge needs (Jordan et al., 2008). For school students who typically engage less frequently with news media than adults do (Ang et al., 2006; Sternberg, 1998), media literacy education pertaining to news media may simply not be timely. It may be more appropriate to offer media literacy education (at least that relating to news media) to adults, for whom the need to understand news media is more immediate. Media literacy education in school contexts could instead focus on types of media more relevant to young people, such as entertainment media and reality television.

In contrast to the extensive literature on school-based media literacy education, information on existing media literacy education programs for adults is difficult to locate. One would assume, however, that any such programs would be based on the common definition of media literacy, “the ability to access, understand, evaluate and create media content” (European Commission, 2007). By way of example, the adult media literacy training program at the Pori Adult Education Centre in Finland (Vallemaa & Engblom, 2007) addresses each of the components of the European Union’s media literacy definition, as indicated in Table 3.

**Table 3: Adult media literacy training components and the media literacy competencies addressed**

<b>Program component</b>	<b>Media literacy aspect addressed</b>
Computer skills, including Net navigation	Access
Reading skills	Access, understand
Critical reading, including critical reading of the media	Understand, evaluate

Writing skills	Create
Website creation	Create
Evaluating the reliability of Net information sources	Understand, evaluate
Copyright	Access, understand, create
Netiquette	Access, understand, create

While this table provides only a broad-brush description of the Pori adult media literacy program, it does reveal an attempt to address each of the aspects of media literacy included in existing definitions.

The US-based Center for Media Literacy has developed a media literacy kit which may be used as a basis for media literacy education at any age level (Thoman & Jolls, 2004). Interestingly, although it presents the definition of media literacy as "... provid[ing] a framework to access, analyse, evaluate, create and participate using messages in a variety of forms..." (Jolls & Thoman, 2008, p42), the kit in fact focuses solely on the critical literacy aspects of that definition, entirely overlooking the 'access' component. It does, however, provide an excellent framework for these critical literacy aspects, in the form of Five Key Questions, for either deconstruction or construction of media products:

**Deconstruction: Five Key Questions**

1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently from me?
4. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented in – or omitted from – this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

**Construction: Five Key Questions**

1. What am I authoring?
2. Does my message reflect understanding in format, creativity and technology?
3. Is my message engaging and compelling for my target audience?
4. Have I clearly and consistently framed values, lifestyles and points of view in my content?
5. Have I communicated my purpose effectively?

(Jolls & Thoman, 2008, p47)

Rather than imposing a set of absolute value judgements onto the media, as early approaches to media literacy attempted to do, these questions are intended to guide the media literate citizen towards deep and individualised understandings of media products. As Rogow notes, "because people always interpret what they see, hear, and read through the lens of their own experience...students... when provided with

the skills to analyze for themselves, will come to conclusions that differ from our own” (Rogow, 2004, p31). This approach to media literacy education reveals a constructivist underpinning, in that it empowers the individual to evaluate the media message according to their personal frameworks, hence generating their own meaning. I believe, however, that there is an additional step required to make the approach truly constructivist. To effectively enable citizens to evaluate media products according to their personal requirements, the individual must first be aware of what those requirements are. To decide whether the answers to the Five Key Questions make a particular media product appropriate to our requirements, we must ask the additional question: what is my information need?

Such a focus on needs may also explain the puzzle over media literate citizens’ media diets not differing significantly from those of non-media literate people. Not all information needs may require ‘good quality’ media in order to be satisfied. It is possible that in some cases, ‘low quality’ media may suffice. Perhaps then it is more useful to describe media as being ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ for a specific and personalised information need, rather than defer to a good/bad dichotomy. This ‘needs’ focus also becomes increasingly relevant in the context of new media technologies, as will be discussed later in this paper.

### **Contexts of media literacy education: Informal media literacy instruction**

While the abovementioned media literacy education programs are conducted in a formal setting, informal media literacy training for adults may also be occurring in the broadcast media. Hybrid information/entertainment television shows such as the US-based satirical news show *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, or Australian shows *Media Watch* and *The Panel*, effectively perform the critical aspects of media literacy openly before the audience. Baym notes that *The Daily Show* deconstructs journalistic practices, and conducts an “explicit criticism of the media”, using “humor as the license to confront political dissembling and misinformation, and to demand a measure of accountability” (Baym, 2004, p13-14). *Media Watch* directly and openly provides “media analysis and comment” (Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), 2009), whilst the informal and humorous approach of *The Panel* mobilises and empowers its audience by providing “a critical perspective of news” (Harrington, 2005, p83). Through explicitly performing media critique and deconstruction before the audience, these shows may be providing tacit instruction in the critical mechanisms of media literacy.

The various media literacy contexts and approaches described so far, to varying degrees address the functional (‘access’, ‘create’) and critical (‘understand’, ‘evaluate’) aspects of media literacy included in current definitions. While I agree that these abilities are essential for an effective, sceptical and intelligent engagement with media products, I believe more is needed to navigate new media forms. Current media literacy definitions and training need to be extended to fully support citizens in dealing with new and emerging media technologies. This will be explored in the next section.

## Enhancing media literacy education: Focusing on needs

In recent years, rapid technological changes have radically altered the ways in which citizens obtain and consume media products. These changes raise questions regarding the scope of traditional media literacy definitions and training programs. In this section, I will propose an extension of existing media literacy definitions to better empower citizens to engage with new media. This proposed extension will guide media literacy education to a more constructivist approach, in line with contemporary theories of learning.

A recent review by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) found that existing definitions of media literacy fail to capture the full range of skills required to engage with new and emerging media technologies (Penman & Turnbull, 2007). ACMA suggest that the rapid pace of technological change ultimately makes rigid definitions ineffective, and instead propose a set of three questions to guide media literacy education in the future:

1. “How can we help prepare people to participate in the new convergent culture?”
2. How can we help them to see how the media is shaping their understandings?
3. How can we help them make informed value judgements about their digital practices?”

(Penman & Turnbull, 2007, p6)

Such broad questions may indeed be an effective way to guide media literacy education generally. However, at the coal-face, practitioners need to break these guidelines down into specific skills in order to make instruction possible. To do this, we must consider specifically how new technologies differ from older forms, and what implications these changes have for audiences.

New media forms, most notably those employing Internet technologies, may be seen primarily as ‘pull’ technologies (Parikh & Verma, 2002). Pull technologies require the user to initiate a search before information may be retrieved (Parikh & Verma, 2002). In contrast, push technologies, such as traditional television and newspapers, ‘push’ predetermined content out to the audience. Some Internet functions may also be viewed as push technologies (Parikh & Verma, 2002; Stanley, 1998). For example, RSS feeds and alerts push customised content to the user. However, these facilities still require detailed input from the user. The user must initially customise the service to their needs through the application of searches or filters. In short, Internet technologies of both the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ varieties require the audience/user to initially identify and effectively request the information they require. Traditional media formats such as television and newspapers do not have this requirement. Merely switching on the television will result in information being broadcast into your home.

This key difference between traditional and new media has profound implications for media literacy behaviours. Engaging effectively with new media technologies requires more than merely the technical ability to ‘access’ the media, as described in existing definitions. Rather, ‘pull’ technologies require the user to first be sufficiently aware of their information needs, and then be able to articulate them in a way which is effective for computer searching, or identify an appropriate online resource. It is

only after these two conditions are met that the commonly identified aspects of media literacy, the ability to “access, understand, evaluate and create” media content, become relevant.

For many librarians, these additional steps will be familiar – they reflect the core activities of the reference interview. Reference librarians will be well aware that the information request initially presented by the patron often does not accurately reflect the patron’s actual information need (Brown, 2008; Ross, Nilsen, & Dewdney, 2002). People frequently find it difficult to know their information needs, much less articulate them. It is only after targeted questioning during the reference interview that the true information need emerges. The essential task of need identification cannot therefore be assumed to be within the existing skill set of the citizen. However, it is required to effectively use new media ‘pull’ technologies, and therefore deserves a place in media literacy definitions and training. The ability to break down the initial information request to reveal the underlying information need is a skill already possessed by library professionals, making librarians ideally placed to offer this training within the context of media literacy education.

While the common definitions of media literacy do not include this need identification skill, interestingly, the European Charter for Media Literacy does incorporate the matching of needs with media use in its description of the media literate citizen. Such a citizen is able to “use media technologies effectively to access, store, retrieve and share content to *meet their individual and community needs* and interests” (Euro Media Literacy, 2006, my emphasis). Incorporating needs identification into media literacy definitions will also reflect a blurring between media literacy and another concept familiar to librarians, information literacy. Information literacy emerges from the computer science and information retrieval disciplines, hence its ready applicability to new media use. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has identified a series of performance indicators for information literacy, the first of which relates to need identification: “[t]he information literate student defines and articulates the need for information” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000, p8).

Livingstone et al compare media literacy and information literacy, concluding that:

“While media literacy and information literacy have developed as separate traditions, they share many of the same values. In general, the “media literacy” tradition stresses the understanding, comprehension, critique and creation of media materials, whereas the “information literacy” tradition stresses the identification, location, evaluation and use of media materials. Metaphorically, we might say that “media literacy” sees media as a lens through which to view the world and express oneself, while “information literacy” sees information as *a tool with which to act on the world*. Both perspectives are relevant for developing media literacy policy.”

(Livingstone, Van Couvering, & Thumim, 2005, p12, my emphasis)

If media literacy training is to adequately equip people to utilise new media technologies and to participate as active citizens, the current definition needs to be extended to incorporate the precursors for new media use described in this paper:

- the ability to accurately identify information needs, and
- the ability to identify the most appropriate information source/ search strategy to meet a particular need

The familiarity librarians have with regard to information literacy makes them ideally placed to conduct media literacy education based on this extended definition.

To participate effectively in the political life of their societies, citizens must be able to locate information *they* trust to answer questions *they* have about matters which are important to *them* and *their* communities. Political information is not a 'one-size-fits-all' commodity. For example, Table 4 draws on data from my PhD survey to provide a sample of the range of needs sought from the media by survey respondents.

**Table 4: A selection of needs being sought from the news media by survey respondents**

Need being sought	Percentage of respondents
So I can learn what's going on in the country and the world	92%
So I can keep up with what the government is doing	82%
To find out things I need to know about daily life	80%
So I can talk with other people about what's covered	68%
Because it makes me want to learn more about things	66%
To help me judge what political leaders are really like	60%
Because it is entertaining	30%
Because it's enjoyable	26%
To help me relax	13%
Because it helps me forget about work/school	8%

The political information required by a student activist protesting about mandatory detention of refugees<sup>2</sup> is likely to differ radically from the political information required by a parent concerned about traffic zoning around their local school. Citizens engage with their political environments not in a uniform way, but on issues and in ways which are uniquely relevant to their personal situations. Given that the bulk of political information in developed nations is distributed by the media (Chadwick, 1998; Jones, 2005; Ward, 2006), it is therefore important that media literacy enable individuals to fulfil their personal information needs. Increasing the focus on the needs of the individual learner will increase the relevancy of media literacy education to the individual, and help us to arrive at a truly constructivist approach for media literacy.

This type of media literacy education will occur within a personally relevant context, and will provide learners with the skills to understand their information need, and then to access, understand, evaluate and create media content appropriate to that need. It will recognise that information needs, even for a single individual, will change according to context. The notion of 'good' or 'bad' media products will be replaced by the idea of 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' products. For example, if the citizen simply needs to know the name of the political leader of their state or province, a local

<sup>2</sup> The issue of governmental treatment of refugees has been a 'hot topic' in Australia in recent years.

tabloid newspaper will be an appropriate source. However if they require in-depth analysis of the global economic crisis, they will understand that a more specialised information source would be required.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to highlight a key shortcoming of existing media literacy approaches: that of overlooking the importance of needs identification as an initial step in media selection. Self-awareness of one's actual information need is not automatic, as can be witnessed daily at reference desks in libraries the world over. Citizens very often simply do not know what it is that they need when it comes to information. Without this knowledge, selecting the most appropriate information source from the vast information environment available becomes an uncertain, possibly even random, enterprise. Incorporating reference interview-type training into media literacy education, whereby the individual will develop the skills to interrogate themselves regarding their underlying information needs, will enhance media literacy approaches. This increased focus on the needs of the individual will also push media literacy education into a more constructivist methodology.

In addition, this paper has stressed the importance of media literacy training for adults. Media literacy education received in school or even university cannot be expected to retain its relevance over time in our rapidly evolving information environment. Further, constructivist teaching approaches highlight the importance of context to the learning process, thus it may be more effective to offer media literacy education relating to news media use to adults, whilst school-based approaches focus on types of media more relevant to young people, such as entertainment media.

Librarians are ideally placed to offer such community-based media literacy education for adults. They already understand, through their training and practice of the reference interview, how to identify underlying information needs. In addition, for librarians experienced in the practice and instruction of information literacy, the extension of media literacy practices suggested in this paper will come as no surprise. Finally, libraries are placed within community contexts, where the everyday practice of media literacy occurs. The Alexandria Manifesto stresses the link between libraries, a well informed citizenry and effective governance. It is clear that libraries have a role to play in fostering media literacy within their communities.

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