ABSTRACT

Beyond Cynicism: Media education and civic learning outcomes in the university explores what media literacy courses actually teach students. Do students become more knowledgeable consumers of media messages? Do students, armed with that knowledge, become more engaged citizens? A large multi-year study utilizing a sample of 239 University of Maryland undergraduates in a pre-post/control quasi-experiment, found that the students enrolled in a Media Literacy course increased their ability to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze media messages in print, video, and audio format. Based on the positive empirical findings, focus group sessions were conducted within the experimental group and the control group. When the discussions concerned media relevance and credibility, the students from the media literacy class expressed considerable negativity about media's role in society. Preliminarily, these findings suggest that media literacy curricula and readings which are solely or primarily focused on teaching critical analysis skills should be an essential first step in teaching media literacy, but that the curriculum should not end there. This paper concludes by recommending a way forward for post-secondary media literacy education—one that aims to connect media literacy skills and outcomes that promote active citizenship.
Introduction: Citizenship in a Hyper Media Age

In the present day, the media have assumed the role of a social institution. Media increasingly provide people with means of connecting with others, help to stabilise everyday routines, and function as a general educational tool (Silverblatt 2004). As David Buckingham (2003) argues:

The media are undoubtedly the major contemporary means of cultural expression and communication: to become an active participant in public life necessarily involves making use of the modern media. The media, it is often argued, have now taken the place of the family, the church and the school as the major socializing influence in contemporary society (p. 5).

Parallel to their socializing functions, media have unavoidably adopted a civic role: that of preserving and maintaining an informed public. Jenkins (2006) builds on Michael Schudson’s (1998, 1999) concept of the *monitorial citizen*—a gatherer, monitor, and surveyor of information, who “swings into public action only when directly threatened” (Lemann 1998)—in his account of the relationship between digital media and citizenship. Jenkins focuses on the ways in which digital media and the Internet have shifted what it means to be an “informed” citizen. In his book *Convergence Culture*, he combines Schudson’s new musings on citizenship with collective intelligence scholar Pierre Levy’s (1997) notion of knowledge culture—seeing media users as “knowledgeable in some areas, somewhat aware in others, operating in a context of mutual trust and shared resources” (p. 226)—to promote a scenario in which “the monitoring citizen needs to develop new critical skills in assessing information—a process that occurs both on an individual level within the home or the workplace, and on a more collaborative level through the work of various knowledge communities” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 227). Jenkins’s work highlights the need for
a public educated not only about how to interpret media messages, but also about the increasingly ubiquitous role of media and information in civic and democratic society. The response to this need, often referred to as media literacy education, is at the core of educational movements aimed at preparing students for lives of active and engaged citizenship.

This paper details the results of a multi-year exploration of a media literacy course in U.S. higher education and seeks to explore whether media literacy education is indeed preparing students to be engaged, aware, and participatory citizens. The study utilized a sample of 239 University of Maryland undergraduates in a pre-post/control quasi-experiment, and a portion of students in focus groups, to ask what students in a media literacy class learned both in terms of media analysis skills, and dispositions towards media’s role in civil society. As the results show, students learned to comprehend, evaluate and analyze media messages more effectively, but this did not equate into an understanding of the media’s role in democratic society. Rather, the students from the media literacy class were quick to discredit, or blame, media for their shortcomings, with no reflection on the nuances of the media’s role in their daily lives. The results of this study reveal a need to reevaluate the role of post-secondary media education outcomes to better prepare students for lives of active and inclusive citizenship.

Post-Secondary Media Literacy Education: Preparing an Active Citizenry

Media literacy, commonly defined in the United States as the ability to “access, evaluate, analyze and produce all types of communication” (Aufderheide 1993), is predicated not only on enhancing students’ media analysis skills, but also their ability to critically discern information relevant to their lives and communities. As Chris Worsnop (2004) writes:
Good media education courses do not focus on propagandizing students into a single way of thinking. They provide students with a broad range of critical and analytical skills to help them make their own choices and decisions about the ideological and political messages surrounding them in 21st century culture (p. 1).

At a very basic level, successful media literacy education must teach students the critical skills needed to read media effectively. Where media literacy education becomes unique is in its aim to connect critical analysis skills to an understanding of media’s larger political and ideological implications (Kellner and Share 2005). While such a connection seems self-evident—if students are taught how to deconstruct and evaluate media messages across all formats, they will become more active and understanding civic participants—rarely have scholars and educators asked how such connections are made or evaluated what strategies can ensure that such outcomes are met.

What does it mean to connect media analysis with political and civic ideologies? How can media literacy move beyond criticism and towards broader understanding and action?

Historically, media literacy pedagogy has assumed that teaching critical analysis skills would directly result in more engaged and informed individuals. This is to assume that if students are provided with a set of evaluative tools to deconstruct media, they will be able to analyze messages objectively. In turn, such analytical ability will produce a critical disposition in students (Morgan 1998), which results in a more nuanced ability to identify and see through the media’s attempts to persuade, manipulate, influence and control. In the United States particularly, this approach has commonly been seen as protectionist: a matter of sensitizing students to the negative effects of the media (Buckingham 2005). This protectionist approach to teaching media in the classroom can enable students to feel empowered, but it often hinges on pinpointing the faults of media to create one overarching critique of a message. Such an approach does not address the complexities involved in interacting with media messages, both in
terms of the values brought to a message, and the social and cultural constructs around which messages are created (Buckingham 2003). Indeed, as is evidenced in the results of this study, teaching media criticism alone can be potentially harmful to students.

**Beyond Inoculation, Towards Empowerment**

In the present information age, protecting students against the effects of media is akin to protecting a child from the sun. While it is smart to educate about the potential harms of the sun to the body and skin, the child must also be taught about the sun’s absolute necessity for the existence of the Earth as we know it. In the same way, media are essential for democratic society as we know it. Students should be taught not only to protect themselves from media, but also to understand the complex, often dynamic, and necessary existence of media.

In a 2005 speech titled “Will Media Education Ever Escape the Effects Debate”? David Buckingham attempted to show that media education, on all levels of schooling, should ultimately not be about protecting youth *from* media effects, but about engaging students *with* media:

Ultimately, I think the effects debate puts us all in a false position. It puts kids in a false position, because it presumes that they are incompetent – that they are somehow passive dupes or victims of the media. And then it marks out a place for teachers as their saviors, as the people who will rescue them from media influence and show them the error of their ways. I think this mistakes what kids already know about media; and it oversimplifies how they learn (p. 20).

Defining media education as an antidote to media effects assumes that the audience is powerless and that the media are all-powerful. Teaching about the effects of media is central to media
literacy education. However, media educators who use effects theories to expose predominantly negative and critical media practices often overlook two key points. First, highlighting negative media practices excludes the diverse, alternative, positive, and necessary roles that the media perform. If media education does not account for the numerous ways in which media work to keep societies informed, especially in a global age, it will be excluding important media functions from the conversation. Second, couching media literacy in *cause and effect* frameworks ignores the key complexities involved in the civic roles of media. As Buckingham (2005) argues:

> …we can only understand the role of the media in the context of other social, historical and cultural forces […] seeing this in terms of simple notions of ’cause and effect’ often leads us to ignore the complexity of what we are concerned about (p. 19).

Media literacy educators should not teach about the effects of media with the sole aim of enabling students to protect themselves from media influences. Rather, they should acknowledge the social contexts within which all media are created, and emphasise the personal values and perspectives that all individuals bring to messages. This can allow for a media literacy experience that highlights the connections between media, culture, and society. Only then can media literacy truly reach its potential to move beyond inoculation and towards civic empowerment. As the results of this research will show, if media education is not fulfilling its objective to provide not only media analysis skills, but also the ability to effectively use media to exercise democratic and individual rights (Brownell and Brownell 2003), it will run the risk of breeding cynical dispositions rather than nuanced understandings of media’s central role in democracy.
Methods

This study employed two research methods—a quasi-experiment and focus groups—to address the following research questions:

Q1. How does media literacy education affect undergraduate university students’ media comprehension, evaluation, and analysis skills?

Q2. How does media literacy education influence university students’ understanding of the media’s roles and responsibilities in a democratic society?

To explore these questions, this study utilized 239 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Maryland. Of the 239 total participants, 170 were enrolled in the *Journalism 175: Media Literacy* (J175) course in the fall of 2006, offered through the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, and open to enrollment across the university. The students from J175 formed the experimental group. In addition to the J175 participants, 69 undergraduates from the University of Maryland’s College of Education participated as the control group.

The entire sample participated in a series of experimental measures that took the form of a pre-post/post-only quasi-experiment design, with a post-only control group. The experiment measured media literacy skill attainment—comprehension, evaluation, and analysis—across audio, video, and print formats.

*Quasi-Experiment*

The experimental design divided the 239 subjects into four groups. Five hypotheses measured differences in media skills attained. A media literacy skills assessment test compared average test scores between the four groups to assess whether there were significant differences.
between students who took the test before and after the course, and those who never took the
course, or any similar courses. The four groups were therefore as follows:

1. No-course (n=69): This was the control group. It consisted of 69 students from the
   College of Education at the University of Maryland.
2. Pre-course (n=62): These students were enrolled in the J175 course and completed the
   skills assessment test at the beginning of the J175 course.
3. Post-course* (n=62): These are the same students who were in the pre-course group.
   They completed the skills assessment test at both the beginning and end of the J175
   course.
4. Post-course only (n=108): These were students enrolled in the J175 course who took the
   skills assessment test only at the conclusion of the course.

The assessment test consisted of a television measure, a radio measure, and a print
measure. Each measure was accompanied by a two-part survey questionnaire that was
completed by the subjects after exposure to a specific measure. The first part of each
questionnaire consisted of five multiple choice recall questions, specific to the content of each
message. These questions were included not to judge recall specifically, but to sensitize the
subjects to the content of the messages before they completed the second section.

The second section of the survey consisted of seven open-ended questions. The open-
ended questions were developed to measure comprehension (summarize the message in the
“who, what, when, where, why, how” format; what is the purpose of the message?), analysis
(identify the sender of the message and its origins; what is omitted from the message? how did
the message hold attention? what does this message say about the issue?), and evaluation (what does this information suggest about the issue? how has this information changed what you believe about the issue?)

The pre-course group students (also post-course*) were predominantly freshmen (56.5%), almost evenly divided in gender (53.2% women), and approximately half were white/Caucasian. The post-course only group, which took the skills assessment test only at the conclusion of the course, was comparable to the pre-course group, in that it also consisted of slightly more females (53.7%), and most were freshmen (39.8%) and sophomores (37%).

**Measures**

The open-ended question codes were developed exclusively by the researcher, based on a random sample of questionnaires selected from the study, and past work in media education evaluation (see Worsnop 1997; Hobbs and Frost 2003; Arke 2005; Christ 2006). Extensive coding protocols were built for these questions, in the form of a 5-point scale; and advanced university students were trained as coders. Chronbach’s Alpha (1951), an inter-rater reliability statistic, also used by Hobbs and Frost (2003), is known to be highly reliable for experimental coder reliability. Chronbach’s Alphas range from .76 to .84 for the five open-ended questions coded for in this study. This is considered reliable for inter-coder reliability (Bland and Altman 1997), and established a means to continue the study with a confident level of accuracy.

T-tests were used to compare the average test scores of the participants and to analyze measures of covariance. Test scores were compared between the experimental group before and after, and against the control group. As the groups were separate entities, the t-test was the
strongest predictor for comparing distribution means, in order to infer that the means of the corresponding populations also differed (George and Mallery 2003).

Educational outcomes in general are difficult to quantify; and measuring skills through quantitative testing is often limited. In this study, quantitative skills measurements were not used to elicit new and unique findings, but to provide a baseline for subsequently asking students, who were by traditional means considered “media literate,” about how they personally understand the connections between media, community, and democracy. While the quasi-experiment did reveal significant effects of the curriculum on students’ critical media analysis skill levels, it did not address individual dispositions towards media. Focus groups were therefore added to provide such experiential reflection, and to help overcome the limitations of measuring “effects” on students. Three focus groups were conducted: two sessions (n=10, n=8) were conducted with students from the J175 course, and a third focus group (n=9) was conducted with students from the control group. The focus groups shared perspectives, views, attitudes, beliefs, responses, motivations and perceptions (Litosseliti 2003) on media’s role in society and their civic and democratic functions. Employing mixed methodologies thus allowed for both inductive and deductive reasoning and assertions to be made about the results of the study with greater quality and scope (Sydenstricker-Neto 2007; Creswell 2002).

**Experimental Group Findings: Students Reflect Skills Attainment**

Hypothesis one tested if, on average, the test scores of the no-course (control) group differed from the test scores of the pre-course experimental group. The presumption was that there would be no statistical difference between the average test scores of the two groups. An
independent samples t-test was run for each separate medium (TV, radio, print) and for the total scores of the three media combined. This score is referred to as the media literacy score.

The results strongly confirmed a baseline for comparison. The no-course group and the pre-course group, across all three media and in total, revealed no significant difference in average test scores. The no-course group ($M=40.16, SD=5.209$) and the pre-course group ($M=40.89, SD=3.6$) showed no significant difference in average media literacy skills assessment test scores, $t(62)=.933$, at $p < .05$.

Hypothesis two assumed there would be a statistically significant relationship of average test scores between the pre-course and the post-course* groups. The hypothesis assumed that media literacy skills would be attained through the course curriculum. The t-test revealed that in all cases, significant differences were attained. The overall average media literacy score for the pre-course group ($M=40.89, SD=3.6$) and the post-course* group ($M=45.98, SD=4.4$), $t(62) = -6.94$ $p < .001$, revealed a statistically significant difference in average test scores. This also occurred with similar strength ($p < .001$) in TV ($t=-4.705$), radio ($t=-6.170$) and print ($t=-5.552$) average scores. Such findings showed that significant improvement was made in skill attainment between the beginning of the media literacy course and the end.

Hypothesis three posited that there would be a statistically significant difference in the average test scores of the pre-course group and the post-course only group. This hypothesis was tested in order to show that the curriculum was the key for the increase in test scores, and not outlying factors such as memory recall and repetition. Once again, the comparison reinforced the effects of the media literacy curriculum. The pre-test group’s ($M=40.89, SD=3.6$) average total media literacy test score was significantly lower than the post-course only group ($M=44.96,$
SD=4.5), t(108) = -6.193, at p < .001. This result proves that the difference, across all media formats, was significant, and not largely a cause of externalities.

The fourth hypothesis stated that there would be no significant difference in the average test scores between the post-course* group and the post-course only group. Although the post-course* group with prior exposure to the test scored slightly better on average total media literacy skill grade (post-course $M=45.98$, post-course only $M=44.96$), no significant difference could be proven. These groups took the test at the same time, during the J175 final exam. The data analyses revealed that the post-course* group ($M=45.98$, $SD=4.4$) and the post-course only group ($M=44.96$, $SD=4.5$) showed no significant difference in average media literacy skills assessment test scores, $t(108)=1.437$, at $p < .05$. Such a result proved that, on average, all students exposed to the media literacy curriculum increased their comprehension, evaluation, and analysis skills pertaining to print, video, and audio media.

The fifth hypothesis stated that there would be a significant difference in the average test scores of the no-course group and the post-course only group. The results here further confirmed significant differences in the average test scores across all media formats and in total media literacy scores between students who had not enrolled in the media literacy class ($M=40.16$, $SD=5.209$), and those who had ($M=44.96$, $SD=4.449$), $t(108)= -6.326$, at $p < .001$.

Overall, the experimental results provide good evidence of media literacy education’s effectiveness in developing skills of critical analysis. The results of the experiment successfully, and with no great surprise, proved that students enrolled in a media literacy course increased their critical skills in media analysis across all media formats. Such results, however, failed to address a larger question: does this skill attainment allow students to better understand the larger
political, ideological and democratic complexities of the media? Media literate individuals should be capable of applying their newfound skills to understand and critically engage with media’s larger social and civic responsibilities. As Sonia Livingstone (2004) has argued:

…it to focus solely on questions of skill or ability neglects the textuality and technology that mediates communication. In consequence, it unwittingly supports a universalist, cognitive framework, thereby neglecting in turn the historical and cultural contingency of both media and the social knowledge processes that interpret them (p. 8).

Focus Group Findings: Students express considerable negativity towards media

“I’m actually a little disheartened. I mean, to think that it’s always going to be this way. It’s sad.” - Student, J175: Media Literacy course-

Numerous similarities and differences were noted between the two experimental focus group sessions and the control focus group session. Most importantly, and perhaps of most concern, were the consistently negative views towards media expressed by the experimental group students. These students, all from the J175: Media Literacy course, described the benefits of media literacy education and its influence on their relationship with media. They praised media literacy’s ability to help them “look deeper” at media. However, when the conversation addressed media’s influence on society and democracy, the students’ cynical views overshadowed the substance of their conversation. They seemed to adopt a highly defensive view, focused more on denouncing media functions than on critical reflection and discussion of why the media work as they do and to what end.

Why So Negative?

The negativity discovered in the experimental group discussions was cause for concern on numerous fronts. First, the general climate of cynicism was extensive. The negative tone of
the conversations on media relevance and bias overshadowed any substantive discussions about relevance and credibility that may have evolved. As one male student stated:

I think a lot of our generation is cynical. I personally feel like organizations are out to get us. I think everyone needs to question everything. I think when the media tell you something on the news, they aren’t trying to give you information, but trying to benefit themselves. It’s like what corporations try to do to better themselves.

This comment, just one example of the general tone of the discussion, alludes to a lack of trust in media systems. One student echoed the statements above: “…you can’t trust anyone or anything. You have to be on your toes. You can’t trust anything. You always have to assume there’s a catch or someone’s out to get something from you.” These ideas were generally accepted in the discussion reflecting a general tone of distrust and suspicion consistent throughout.

Another male student from the experimental group went even further by stating, “I don’t believe anything I see on television. Even if I watch a bunch of sources, I don’t believe it. If A and B are giving the story, I still don’t believe it.” When prodded to expand on this statement, the student offered no further explanation or reasoning, but simply reasserted that he did not trust one bit of information he received. In a response that wryly attempted to defuse this comment, another student said: “We aren’t plotting rebellion, but I think we are a generation that is cynical.”

Cynical dispositions are common in many young adults entering university. Questioning the world and its intricacies is a natural and appropriate reflex in all people. However, in this specific case the cynical ideas expressed by the students were in direct response to media and their societal roles. What is the connection between any pre-existing cynicism and the critical approach to media in a media literacy class? Perhaps media literacy education as it stands is
inadequate to its goal of creating more aware citizens. The following quotes reflect the negativity pervasive in the experimental group discussions:

“All news is biased news.”

“I’ve never turned on the news and been like, wow, glad I watched that, made my day a whole lot better... or, like, felt informed about something relevant.”

“I have this theory that the media is much more about money and control than anything.”

“I think the government holds back a lot of information, because of fear of public reaction.”

I think the government has a foot in every major corporation out there. Media corporations.

“I think real news is pretty depressing. Everyone wants to turn towards some type of entertainment just to take their mind off of all this depressing news.”

In general the conversations among the students who had followed the course were less substantive than accusing, and less reflexive than assuming. This may be a product of group dynamics or conversational trends, but one aspect was evident: these students were quick to deride media at every possible point.

The control group also expressed negativity, but not to the extent of the experimental group. Their negative remarks were interspersed in larger discussions about audience roles in understanding media, definitions of media, and larger ideologies that media can reinforce. Their occasional lack of critical engagement and substantive discussion was likely due to a lack of formal and critical investigation into media functions. The nature of the control group’s skepticism can be seen in one student’s comment:

I watch news with a cynical eye. I think you have to. Because people watch stuff and buy everything they see, and that’s annoying. I don’t watch news and say, really, and take everything they are saying...you have to be cynical to be realistic.
This student used the word cynicism to describe a sort of healthy skepticism, mentioning that it was his responsibility to be aware of media practices and seek out inconsistencies in specific messages. This remark was made during a discussion about media credibility with students who claimed to have no prior formal media education. Again, this statement can be seen as rather idealistic and somewhat unrealistic, but rarely were similar sentiments expressed in both experimental focus groups. The following quotes reflect the general tone of the control group discussions:

“I personally always try to assume that journalists are going to try and tell us the truth because of their code of ethics, but I also understand that people are people. So they’re going to have biases whether they try as hard as they can to be fair or not.”

“You can have smart guides for news media, but there is always going to be the money and the corporations, and you won’t be able to separate those things. Politics and religion are always going to be involved, but we know that, so we have to see it…”

“Everything is going to have a bias no matter what. I mean we’re never going to go over to Iraq and see what’s happening, so it’s good to have a discussion about these things. To question things.”

More Skills, More Negativity: Why a Disconnect?

Attempting to find reasons for the negativity manifest in the discussions lends to numerous possible explanations. First, such outcomes could be representative of the generation involved in this study. In light of the recent political (WMD scandal, Libby trial) and corporate (Global Banking Collapse, Enron, Tyco) corruption exposed in the United States, and building on past national political scandals (Clinton/Lewinsky, Reagan/Iran Contra, Nixon/Watergate), students may be sensitized to react negatively to the media industry, and political coverage in general.
Second, the teaching of the J175 course could have had much to do with the existing negative outlook of the students in the experimental groups. Some students remarked that they were taught to be cynical, as they were only shown the negative ways in which media worked to distort reality and sensationalize fact. This point is well taken and an issue that deserves its own exploration. Media educators typically advocate outcomes that reflect understanding and awareness, and not negativity and cynicism. However, they rarely comment on how such broader outcomes might be attained. Rather, media educators assume that teaching students the skills to be critical will automatically lead to greater understanding and engagement with media. Without defining the experiential outcomes of media literacy, we run the risk of succeeding in teaching students to be critical without teaching them how to become engaged.

At the conclusion of one experimental group session, the moderator asked in passing: “In light of your praise for media literacy, how can you guys be so cynical”? One male student from the experimental group replied: “People in Iraq aren’t concerned about this because they have to worry about putting food on their table everyday. We don’t, so we can afford to be cynical.” This comment – and the broader findings of the study – raise disturbing questions about the social basis, and the political consequences, of students adopting such an apparently cynical stance.

**New Directions for Post-Secondary Media Literacy Education:**

**Connecting Skills & Understanding**

If media literacy outcomes are to be realized in higher education, the connections between critical media skills and an understanding of media’s essential civic functions must be
emphasized. Scholars (Christ 2006; Kellner & Share 2005; Hobbs 2004; Livingstone 2004; Heins & Cho 2003; Scharrer 2003) have written extensively of media literacy’s need to prepare students for active and participatory lifestyles through a deep understanding of media’s fundamental roles in society. However, outcomes-based investigations into such learning have seldom occurred. This is especially the case in higher education, where few rigorous empirical investigations into media literacy education have taken place.

The following framework consists of a definition for post-secondary media literacy education, a model supporting the transfer from skill attainment to active citizenship, and suggestions for implementing this approach the classroom. This framework should be seen as a recommendation, based on the results of this study, for media educators interested in integrating media literacy outcomes into their classroom.

The Definition

Post-secondary media literacy education aims to prepare students to become:

- **Good Consumers** – by teaching them how to understand, analyze, evaluate, and produce media messages, and;
- **Good Citizens** – by highlighting the role of media in civil society, the importance of being an informed voter, and a responsible, aware, and active participant in local, national, and global communities.

The Model

(Figure 1 inserted here)
The model begins with critical skill attainment, which is a common goal of all media education. The model next addresses the transfer from skill attainment to qualitative learning outcomes. Media literate students should understand the social influences of media, be aware of the democratic necessity of a media system, and feel empowered to be active civic participants. The results of the focus group discussions revealed a gap in the relationship between media skills and critical understanding of media’s societal and democratic functions. This gap was filled largely with cynicism and negativity towards the media industry.

Within the “media literacy classroom” circle are a series of guidelines for post-secondary media educators. Supported by the results of this study, these five guidelines provide concrete classroom teaching techniques intended to cultivate the connections between analytical skills and broader media literacy outcomes.

1. Establishing Connections between Critical Skills and Critical Understanding

Establishing “connections” requires media educators to emphasize how critical analysis skills translate into more knowledgeable and reflexive understandings of media. Students should not be left to make the connection between a media message and its political and ideological implications without having a strong understanding of the fundamental relationship between media, democracy, and citizenship.

In teaching about political election campaigns, for example, media educators should not only show how public relations tactics are used in political image building or attack ads, but also explain why this is done, to what end, and what implications result from such actions. They should also counter every ‘negative’ example with a ‘positive’ one. Students should be asked how they personally feel about these media tactics. How do they think the message may
influence their opinion on the issue? What is the evidence they are using to support their conclusions?

Media educators should also ask about alternative ways to inform the public about political candidates. If students are made aware of the personal and social implications of a media message or practice, they in turn can become aware of how each message plays a larger role in the makeup of political and cultural ideologies.

2. Critical Thinking, not Negative Thinking

Critical thinking is often advanced as the final outcome of media literacy education (Leistyna & Alper, 2007; Kellner & Share, 2007; Feuerstein, 1999). Media educators must ensure that critical thinking is accompanied by an awareness of the necessity of media for engaged citizenship. Otherwise critical thought can quickly become cynical thought. Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share (2005) have developed an outline for what they call “critical media literacy” which focuses on developing a set of critical skills in students that approach ideas of democracy. Rozana Carducci and Robert Rhoads (2005) advocate the term critical citizenship, stating “cultivation of this type of literacy is particularly important in relation to the development of principles, skills, and practices of critical citizenship—a form of citizenship that empowers each individual’s identity and advances democracy and the pursuit of social justice” (p. 3). Erica Scharrer (2006) reports on a study of sixth-grade students’ “critical attitudes towards media violence”, arguing that students would attain critical thinking skills by “demonstrating the ability to analyze the degree of social responsibility in media as they express their attitudes regarding how television should show violence and about media regulation” (p. 71). Scharrer’s results suggested that after a media literacy education, students were more critically inclined to ask the
“right” questions about why violence is shown on television. Her exploration is very helpful, and should be reinforced when attempting to highlight critical thinking as an outcome of media literacy.

3. Including Good Media

Including ‘good’ media examples in the classroom can be beneficial in two distinct ways. First, using good media examples to counterbalance negative examples can help students to stop “blaming the media.” As evidenced in the results of this study, if students are only sensitized to negative media images and messages they may be more prone to blame media for societal shortcomings. David Buckingham believes that blaming media allows people to avoid the complexities and genuine difficulty of confronting and dealing with real social problems. Many media educators, in Buckingham’s (2005) opinion:

…tend to be driven by concerns about ‘bad behaviors’ – sex, drugs, violence, etc. – that they commonly trace back to the influence of the media. Because media educators are well-versed in media functions, they disseminate such pre-conceived opinions to their students. They then think, “if we expose the false ideas, then somehow they’ll realize that they have been misled, and they’ll stop doing all these things that we don’t like (p. 18).

A main underlying predisposition apparent in the experimental groups’ conversations was that media were the root of many social and political problems, and that media literacy had taught them to tactically outsmart media. This, in turn, made them media literate. This mentality positions media as the main culprit for complex social issues and absolves individual responsibility in the media-public relationship.

Second, good media examples should not only come out of the corporate media industry. Using independent and alternative media sources can expose students to how different types of
media address different social complexities. Media educators should no longer only critique the large monoliths of the field to prove their points. Alternative media outlets need to be included in the discussion.

4. Setting Parameters for the Classroom

Setting parameters for the classroom can further reduce the complexities that emerge when trying to define media literacy outcomes. Clarifying the intentions of media inquiry throughout a class can help focus outcomes around such goals as active and engaged citizenship. Post-secondary media literacy parameters can be premised on two distinct educational attributes of media literacy:

1. A focus on skill attainment. Specifically, media comprehension, evaluation, analysis, and production.
2. An overall attention to media’s roles and responsibilities in society and the civic implications of understanding media’s democratic practices.

Focusing on these specific attributes can help enable a distinct understanding of the civic outcomes associated with post-secondary media literacy. Such attributes are flexible. Media literacy’s adoption into the university should be contingent not on following a set of rules but in assuring that a set of outcomes is reached.

5. Teaching through a Civic Lens

The university is the final stop for most in the formal educational process. Scholars (Newman et al., 2004; Dunderstadt & Womack, 2003; Kirp, 2003; Barber, 2002; Ehrlich, 2000a; Ehrlich, 1999; Kerr, 2000; Levine, 1996) have written extensively about the role that higher education
plays in preparing individuals for lives of civic responsibility. Civic education scholar Thomas Ehrlich (2000) highlights this duty:

Institutions of higher education should help students to recognize themselves as members of a larger social fabric, to consider social problems to be at least partly their own, to see the civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate (p. 3).

If this were rewritten to include media in its duties and obligations to civil society, it would read as a manifesto for media literacy, specifically at the post-secondary level.

Figure 2 shows a continuum that reflects the civic progression of a university student. The continuum advocates awareness as the entry point of post-secondary media literacy education. Students, at an undergraduate level, are expected to begin active engagement and participation in civic issues. By enabling students to be better informed about the issues that influence them and their democracy, media literacy can use a civic lens to help students become aware of what the issues are, how they are portrayed, and what influence media have on their effectiveness.

Figure 2 inserted here

Civic awareness can be conceived as the active understanding of how local, national and global issues are represented through public information. Being civically aware entails understanding the political, economic, social and cultural implications of such issues, with an aim to enact engagement and participation in democratic discourse.
Discussion: Future Considerations for Post-Secondary Media Literacy Education

The results of this study evoke numerous questions about the future of media education outcomes in the university. What should a media literate student be like? What are the barriers to successful learning outcomes for post-secondary media education? How can media education teach for active civic engagement in an information age?

Perhaps more importantly, this study begs the question: what are students taking away from the classroom? Media educators spend countless hours engaging students with various broadcast, print, and online media in order to initiate critical discussion and analysis. Less frequently do media educators stop and ponder how students civically engage with media based on such learning experiences. How do they think about community? How do they understand media’s responsibilities in a democracy? Do they see local, national, and global leaders in a new light? Do they question political choices concerning controversial subjects such as abortion, health care, or immigration? Do they understand what voting for a certain initiative means in light of how media outlets portray the issue?

The crux of post-secondary media literacy education is not only that students can perform well on an exam about media or write a strong critique of a media message, but that they gain the ability to transfer their classroom performance into critical thought about the role of information in society and its implications for them as participants in civil society. Yet overseeing this transfer has never been a prerequisite for teaching or learning about media.

The study reported here has both practical and philosophical limitations: it concerns only one course, one curriculum, and a small number of instructors, who each brought a certain set of ideas, philosophies and approaches into the classroom. It is clearly not representative of media
literacy practices more broadly. However, inquiries like this have rarely been conducted in the past. More rigorous research, exploration, and empirical evaluation are needed. Rigorous inquiries into the effectiveness of media literacy can aid the development of coherent learning outcomes for the university (Christ 2006).

At the conclusion of a media literacy course, students should be able to critically analyze media. Yet they should also be able to connect their newfound analytic abilities to the media that they see outside of the classroom. This includes looking “deeper” at media, but it also includes looking “smarter” at media. It means understanding that cynicism rarely produces change or reform. It means understanding that every individual in Western society is dependent on media for local and global information. It means adopting and adapting such information to become an aware media citizen. Only then will the true benefits of media literacy become apparent.
Sample Demographics - Of the 239 students who participated in the experiment, there were 119 (49.5%) freshmen, 61 (25.5%) sophomores, 44 (18.4%) juniors, and 15 (6.4%) seniors. 233 of the 239 (97.5%) students were between 18-24 years old. The sample consisted of 146 (61%) females and 93 (39%) males. Of these, 59% were white/Caucasian, 20% African American, 12% Asian, and 6% Latino. The remaining 3% of the sample reported their ethnicity as Native American, Pacific Islander, or Other.

See Appendix A for experimental design, overview, and procedures.

See Appendix B for sample Media Literacy Skills Assessment Test.

Groups Two and Three consisted of the same students. They completed the skills assessment test both at the beginning and end of the semester. There was a mortality rate of 17 in this group.

The following three instruments were also chosen because they explored varying issues of national and global prominence: terrorism (Television measure - 6 October 2004, CBS Nightly News with Bob Schaeffer – story on New York City Subway bomb threat), climate change (Print measure, 9 August 2006, Time Magazine: “Vail’s Wind Ambition,” by Clayton Neuman), and sexual behavior (Radio measure, 16 August 2006, National Public Radio (NPR): News and Notes – story on sexual attitudes and music).

The outcome of hypothesis two could have been weakened by the fact that the pre-course group could have simply remembered the skills assessment test, as they were exposed to the same exact test in both experiment infusions in September and December of 2006. Hypothesis
three, however, proved that the curriculum, and not student recall, was the catalyst for increased skill attainment.

vii This was reminiscent of a scene in Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, when British Journalist Thomas Fowler says to American Alden Pyle, concerning the Americans involving the local Viet Cong Army in the Vietnam War, “You and your people are trying to make a war with the help of people who just aren’t interested. They want enough rice…they don’t want to be shot at. They want one day to be much the same as the other. They don’t want our white skins around telling them want they want. Thought’s a luxury. Do you think the peasant sits and thinks of God and democracy when he gets inside his mud hut at night”? (Greene 1955, p.119-20).

Appendix A – Experimental Design, Procedures, and sample Media Literacy Skills

Assessment Test

Procedures

Students were exposed to one message (Radio, TV, Print) at a time, and after it was played, handed a survey questionnaire to complete. Students were given approximately ten minutes to complete each questionnaire. This occurred for all three instruments. Each media message was approximately five minutes in duration. The entire session lasted approximately one hour.

The media messages were shown in random order for each experiment session. In one session, the participants may have taken each survey in the order radio, print, television. While in another session the order went print, radio, television, and so on. Randomizing the order of message exposure ensured that the continued placement of a certain message or medium did not interfere with the results of the study.

The J175 course is randomly divided into eight discussion sections. On September 13 and 14, 2006, the media literacy skills assessment test was administered to four of the eight discussion sections. The total number of pre-test experimental subjects was 62. On December 18th, the first half of the two-hour J175 final was reserved for the second administering of the media literacy skills assessment test to the experimental group. The students were provided consent forms and pre-test surveys as they walked into the auditorium. They were told to take ten minutes to fill in the forms. After collecting these forms, the test-taking procedure was explained to the students. On November 2nd, 20th, and 21st, the control group participants from the College of Education took the media literacy skills assessment test. These students were told that taking...
the test was part of their class participation. Two of the three teachers chose to offer extra credit to those students who participated. The control group participants took the skills assessment test in exactly the same way as the experimental group. The order of media exposure was also randomly rotated.

Appendix B - Sample Media Literacy Skills Assessment Test

1. Please briefly summarize the message (use the who, what, when, where, why, and how structure to write about the message):

2. What is the purpose of the message? (check all that apply): ___ to inform, ___ to persuade, ___ to entertain, ___ self-expression, ___ to teach, ___ to make money.

3. Identify the sender of this message. Where did the information originate?

4. What information or points of view may be missing from this message?

5. How does the sender attract and hold your attention? (check all that apply): ___ the use of color, ___ lighting, ___ movement, ___ the use of sound, ___ camera angles, ___ music.

6. What does this information suggest about the effectiveness of terrorist prevention in the United States?

7. How has this message changed what you believe about the way in which terrorism and safety are handled in the United States?
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Caption: The Post-Secondary Media Literacy Education Model attempts to elaborate on the classroom transfer from teaching critical media analysis skills to enable media literate outcomes.
Caption: In this continuum, *awareness* refers to an understanding of how issues are shaped through media, *engagement* is the active pursuit to know about the issues and public information’s varying portraits of these issues, and *participation* is the action that an individual takes—voting, volunteering—in response to issues.