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Media Literacy: Definitions

As both Wijayananda Jayaweera of UNESCO and Zhang Yanqiu of the Communication University of China noted in the opening WJEC Media Literacy syndicate meeting, "media literacy" is an inexact phrase that does not have an agreed-upon definition, and is instead an "envelope" term that encloses a number of concepts.

That can matter, participants discussed, because the term "media literacy" is not always similarly understood by those who use it and those who hear it. This lack of a shared understanding of the term is not always apparent in public discussions of the subject—or in debates about the wider fields of journalism and media. What do we know, or think we know, about the "media" or about "literacy"? Is our own understanding of that phrase generally shared by those we are talking to— especially when we are speaking across geographic, political or technological divides?[i]

But while there is no standard definition of media literacy, a number of national and international organizations have posited definitions, in most cases describing a media-literate person in terms of citizen competencies, Mr. Jayaweera noted.

The two definitions of media literacy which the author of this report finds especially useful, and which are now subscribed to by a large consortium of international actors, are the parallel definitions adopted by the British regulatory agency Ofcom and by the European Commission.

Ofcom's definition, created in response to "a wide-ranging stakeholder consultation in 2004," is simply: **"the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts."**

The European Commission's definition of media literacy, articulated in its *Communication on a European approach to media literacy in the digital environment*, reads: **"Media literacy is generally defined as the ability to access the media, to understand and to critically evaluate different aspects of the media and media contents and to create communications in a variety of contexts."**

But what to teach and who to teach it to?

In the syndicate session the participants raised a number of concerns both about needed content for a media literacy course and/or training session, as well about the recommended audience for such training.

Olayinka Egbokhare of the University of Ibadan observed that the term "media literacy" may have a different meaning in societies with low alphabetical and numerical literacy rates than in regions with high levels of literacy, while Mr. Jayaweera observed that even in countries with limited literacy rates, citizens consume media—for example, radio and TV—and therefore need to be "media literate."

What that means, Mr. Jayaweera said, is that media literacy should be considered to be a core competency, an integral part of countries' mass education of students. All students need to understand the importance of defending every citizen's right to Freedom of Expression, and all citizens need to understand the critical importance of professional journalists doing professionally what every one has the right to do: access news and information, analyze and assess facts and opinions, and produce and publish their own news and information.

Madeline Quiamco of the Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication and Dr. Yanqui both spoke to the question of audience: Who is already being targeted for media literacy education? What groups could benefit from media literacy training? Dr. Quiamco and Dr. Yanqui noted the need not just to train primary, secondary and university students, but adults, including civil servants. Dr. Quiamco noted that in the Philippines there are significant e-governance efforts that could be supplemented with greater attention to media literacy, and similarly, Dr. Yanqui observed that Chinese government officials are putting considerable resources into ungrading the technology skills of civil servants, and media literacy training could perhaps be folded into that, perhaps by working through regulatory agencies, following the lead of Ofcom in the UK and the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA)

Dr. Egbokhare observed that journalists too could benefit from media literacy training, especially journalists in indigenous language media; there's a need not only to teach journalism standards and ethics, but also the media literacy lessons of why standards matter.

The following remarks by this author, may be seen as background to those comments recorded above by several of the participants of the Media Literacy syndicate.

How can media literacy be understood?

I. First, media literacy is about teaching the basics, such as how to separate fact from opinion. Media literacy teaches individuals to

1. **identify** what "news" is and how media, as well as other actors, decide what matters;
2. **monitor and analyze** media coverage of people and events;
3. **understand** media's role in shaping global issues.

II. And second, media literacy is about teaching individuals how media can help them exercise their right to freedom of expression, within their own communities and across national and cultural borders. Media literacy teaches individuals to

4. **defend** media in their oversight of good government, corporate accountability and economic development (the watchdog role of media);
5. **promote** civil society by themselves becoming a responsible part of the communication chain;
6. **motivate** media to better cover news by communicating to media their expectations for accuracy, fairness and transparency.[ii]

Understanding how news and information flow in the modern world—being media literate—is a first step for citizens toward demanding fair, accurate and contextual news and information. In the

American context, for example, said Knight Foundation president Alberto Ibarguen: "Information is a core need in a democracy. You cannot run a democracy without a free flow of information, shared information which leads to shared values and shared concepts."

Media Literacy: Civil Societies Need Informed Citizens

Why does media literacy matter?

Listen to the Commission of the European Communities in its August 2009 report on Media Literacy:

> "Media literacy is a matter of inclusion and citizenship in today's information society. It is a fundamental skill not only for young people but also for adults and elderly people, parents, teachers and media professionals. Thanks to the internet and digital images, information and content, media literacy is today regarded as one of the key pre-requisites for an active and full citizenship in order to prevent and diminish risks of exclusion from community life.
>
> A media literate society would be at the same time a stimulus and a pre-condition for pluralism and independence in the media. The expression of diverse opinions and ideas, in different languages, representing different groups, in and across societies has a positive impact on the values of diversity, tolerance, transparency, equity and dialogue. The development of media literacy in all sections of society should therefore be promoted and its progress followed closely.
>
> Democracy depends on the active participation of citizens to the life of their community and media literacy would provide the skills they need to make sense of the daily flow of information disseminated through new communication technologies."

Listen to Calvin Sims, former reporter for *The New York Times* and now Program Officer at the Ford Foundation:

> "Media literacy should be a given, a basic human right. How can you navigate the healthcare system, how can you be a good consumer of anything—not just news, if you can't distinguish the quality of the information that you're getting?"

Societies need informed citizens. Development economists used to argue that elections were sufficient to guarantee government accountability and attention to responsible economic development. But as Oxford economist Paul Collier has argued, the West has over-relied on elections as instruments of accountability "relative to everything else…. It was not a stupid theory. But it was wrong," Collier noted. "If you have an uninformed citizenry, elections just won't work."

Media literacy teaches the global public to evaluate available news and information about the world's needs, make sense of the solutions that are on offer, and to themselves communicate and engage with others proportionately and responsibly.

When media environments are rife with censorship, intimidation and monopoly ownership, elections do not necessarily bring good governance, corporate accountability and strong economic development. "Governments have realized that they can evade accountability while still having elections as long as they muzzle the press or buy the press." Citizens cannot elect their best

representatives, accurately monitor industry or best judge how to foster healthy development because they "encounter a double layer of difficulty. They are starved of information and they don't even know how much trust to place in information sources that are available to them." We have learned, Collier said, that "elections only work if we complement them with an informed society."

Media literacy, the BBC World Trust has written, "enables people to access information on issues that shape their lives, without which they cannot make choices. It enables people and communities to understand, debate and reach decisions on the issues that confront them. It enables people to hold their governments to account and provides a critical check on government corruption. It enables people to understand the risks they face, such as from HIV and AIDS, and the steps they can take to protect themselves."

Across the board, more sectors of society are investing in media and media literacy because they want to get a message out to—and understood by—the public. "The basic [media] literacy argument is that you can't get the vaccine in someone's mouth until you get the idea in that someone's head that the vaccine is good for you," Eric Newton, vice president of the Knight Foundation has said. "Anything any foundation wants to do is going to be less effective in countries with disabled or stressed or repressed information systems and will be easier to accomplish in healthy news and information ecosystems. [Media] literacy is the way we help to improve that news and information ecosystem."

Media Literacy: The Impact of an Educated Public on Civil Society

Media literacy—like the traditional kind of ABCs literacy—is about access to and understanding of information. But media literacy is also about teaching people how to use media tools to themselves be part of today's information society. Given both the opportunities and challenges across the globe, as Alison Bernstein, Vice President of the Ford Foundation, has said, "The need for media literacy programs has never been greater."

William Orme, former policy advisor for the United Nations Development Program, noted that it is much easier to teach media literacy to groups in the developing world than to try to control the ever-exploding supply side of news and information targeted at them. "It's more useful and practical," he said, "to try and educate the citizenry to be on guard against hate speech and rumor-mongering or whatever, and have them report it."

Media literacy training as a way to sensitize the public to what they are hearing does not just create more informed citizen, it's an efficient way of dealing with a problem that has few simple remedies. The situation, Orme noted, is that often hate speech comes over "indigenous language broadcasting by radio stations in remote places. Who's actually going to be monitoring it? It's much more useful and practical to try and educate the citizenry who listen to it to be on guard against things that are not only offensive, but rumor-mongering or whatever, and have them report it." One tack that media literacy advocates have taken? Create listeners' clubs for community radio—which become, in effect, organizations for directly delivering media literacy skills to their participants.

Media literacy has value, in other words, not just to shift public opinion, but to broaden responsibility for the news and information coming into (and out of) a community. "The idea that you can report and complain to the media itself: we take that for granted," says Orme. "But that's

not necessarily the assumption of people in most societies that they could or should have any impact on the content of the newspapers they're reading or the radio stations they're hearing."

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i Following the syndicate discussion this morning, I thought it might be worthwhile to note that in discussions about media literacy, it isn't just the definition of "media literacy" that is contested. Many commentators have difficulty with even more basic terms: "media," "journalism" or, for example, "citizen journalism."

Like media literacy, the phrase "citizen journalism," for example, also lacks an accepted universal definition. More people than "citizens" of a given nation may be involved, and what occurs is not always considered "journalism." As a result multiple terms have been used to describe the same phenomenon. "Citizen journalism" has become the most common, but other phrases in use are "community media," "participatory journalism," "civic journalism" and "user-generated content." Additional terms, such as "new media," "digital journalism," "crowdsourcing," and "social networking," are, at times, also used almost interchangeably with "citizen journalism," although in general they refer more specifically either to the technology that underlies much of what passes for "citizen journalism" or they refer to subsets of activities that may fall under "citizen journalism."

The CitizenJournalismAfrica.org website, jointly sponsored by a range of civil society organizations in Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, answers the question "What is Citizen Journalism?" in this way:

> "Citizen Journalism is community news and information shared online and/or in print. The content is generated by users and readers. It can be text / blogs, digital storytelling, images, audio file, podcasting or video. Feedback and discussion on issues raised is received in the same way.
> Citizen journalism is a form of citizen media - where individuals write and or comment on issues they feel are left out of the mainstream media. Many issues addressed in citizen journalism tend to be covered in a superficial way by the mainstream media. A number of professional journalists have their own blogs. Blogging has become a powerful and non-expensive tool for non-journalists to share their stories and views.
> A number of news web sites are encouraging people to comment on issues raised in their stories. Many people have chosen to use blogging as a way of expressing themselves. This also allows them to raise the issues without the fear of being 'cut short' by the editor. Some journalists have their own blog spots where they receive feedback on their articles. More and more civil society organisations are using this form of communication to talk to their communities. They also raise areas of concern and encourage participation."
> http://www.citizenjournalismafrica.org/what-is-citizen-journalism