Foreword

Citation of the final chapter:

This is the accepted manuscript of a chapter published by Routledge in *International Handbook of Media Literacy Education* in 2017, available at: http://doi.org/10.4324/9781315628110

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There can never be not media (but what is media literacy education for?)

The first part of this awkwardly phrased title – there can never be not media – attempts to draw attention to one of the key principles of this handbook: that it's plain wrong to imagine that any form of social life hasn’t always been constructed by some kind of media. And if there are media, then by definition there is media literacy (otherwise how would they work) and thus there is always some form of negotiation around the production, circulation and reception of meaning. Media literacy has never not been with us even if the struggle to define what media literacy might be, has never been resolved (perhaps because it is always contested) but what this handbook offers is a snapshot of the ways that media literacy is being radically transformed under the conditions of media convergence (Jenkins, 2006) and the extraordinary new lifeforms of digital culture.

Media literacy is not however the same thing as media literacy education – which is the point of this handbook. The questions raised in the following sections elaborate an ongoing debate between proponents of "media effects" – that the media can in some ways, determine opinion, attitude, beliefs and identity and those who espouse sociocultural and audience theory perspectives arguing that meanings are produced by people. However, "literacy" is a complex concept that allows for both perspectives: it can suggest a spontaneous, osmotic or organic flow of meanings at the same time as it suggests the mind in society has learnt various interpretive processes which can simultaneously construct and produce meanings (Street, 1985). Literacy itself is not thus a universally uncontested concept and can be as slippery as it can be helpful so that adding it as a suffix to the idea of "media" or "digital" may raise as many problems as it appears to resolve. The idea of media literacy education suggests that living in a mediatized (Krotz, 2007) society does not mean that we pick up how to make sense of the media in the way that, for example, we learn to walk, but that some forms of teaching (and learning) are part of the way that media are enculturated.

The perspectives described in this volume tend to see media literacy education as a structured organised intervention that builds progressively on the ways that media work in everyday life. They are concerned to bring critical, political and sociological understandings to the work that media do but they are agnostic about the sites of education. Some traditions derive from formal institutions (schools and colleges etc.), some from informal and/or peer-led social interactions, some of wider social practices (the media industries for example) and some from regulatory powers and structures within national contexts. This then means that this handbook oscillates between universal (at least global) mechanisms and processes and local (at least national) projects. The diversity of examples collected here point to the way that education for all its global and world culture commonalities (Baker, 2014), fundamentally operates as a national project of the state and therefore different models of media literacy garner different stakeholder consent around the world.

This brings us to the second part of my title: examining the purpose of media literacy education. In some ways the answer to this question is so obvious that it is suffocating. Since, in so many places around the world, media frequently constitute so many
interpersonal and institutional interactions, it is impossible to imagine life without media – especially digital media – and thus not to put media literacy as a key objective in any educational program seems perverse. Simply by listing the place of media in personal and social relationships, in accessing education (in its most traditional sense) participating in community and social life, participating in civic life, as a consumer, as a citizen, it is impossible not to use media technologies all day and every day. Yet for all this ubiquity (not to be confused with universality) media literacy is not usually given the same status as other academic disciplines in curricula around the world.

This seems puzzling. What kind of political project could really imagine populations who can't act as citizens, who can't learn the skills needed in the workforces of the future, who can't participate in civic life or who can't learn to become "good" people? Yet media literacy is rarely afforded a central place in any or many national curricula. Most scholars suggest this is because media literacy education is always in some sense part of a wider critical project and that it is not in the interests of power to produce populations who may question and challenge (Buckingham, 2003). Yet this argument even in its own terms is fraught with contradictions. Unless we imagine a global economy stage-managed by a manipulative elite, how else but with media literacy, could the workers and the citizens of so many countries act and think?

This paradoxical state of affairs where so many acknowledge the importance of digital media in everyday life and yet seem so unwilling to invest in contemporary forms of education can only be helped by volumes such as this, which attempt to collect comparative cases from around the world and to address these questions with a sense of scholarship and historical tradition.

Whilst media literacy may have begun its life as a minority interest, the seemingly unstoppable rise of digital culture, now puts its principles firmly centre stage so that the term digital literacy is now taken as a cipher for so many types of understanding and meaning making. (Of course this Anglo term carries its own conceptual bias and the notion of competence, common in North European countries for example, frames the challenge differently, Erstad, 2013). Whilst there is an urgency around the need for education in this area and certainly a wider constituency of interests support digital literacy in ways that they would not have supported the earlier incarnations of media literacy, the history of research into the earlier terminology raises some pressing questions for contributors to this volume.

Older versions of media literacy focused more on consumption as if literacy were solely a question of “reading” whereas contemporary research explores the dynamics of participation and creative production as the "writing" side of the coin (Sefton-Green, 1995). Furthermore, digital media frequently suggest questions of practice and use which require that research explores social contexts: again the older "mass media" paradigm was more focused on meanings and effects rather than the everyday, the relational, the mundane and the spatial (Leander & Sheehy, 2004). And thirdly, this volume is noteworthy because of the wide range of classroom and indeed non-formal educational sites suggesting a much closer investigation of the intricate transactions that comprise teaching and learning. Here the attention to media literacy education both supports and acknowledges the learning that takes place with friends, in families and in communities as well as acknowledging that the
power of the media is always negotiable, always contestable and constantly in flux. Fourthly, whilst we know that ownership and control of much media rests in the hands of a few, making sense of the media and learning about them is still a local project. Whilst a volume such as this aims for breadth and comprehensiveness this does not mean a reliance on a single interpretive tradition or any sense of media literacy education being a universalistic singularity: if anything the reverse.

Finally, I want to say that not only is it an historical mistake not to recognise that media have always existed and have always been central to modern society – an almost banal point – but today it is almost as if interacting with various forms of media in everyday life virtually in all parts of the globe, is absolutely an all-encompassing, all embracing experience. Sometimes it is as if there is only media! Unless education systems around the world acknowledge the extraordinary place of media in constituting social, personal and political life and unless the curricula and pedagogy that we have developed to date are not scrutinised, developed and promulgated, then I believe our education systems will quite simply fail their populations and any dreams for rational democratic society will simply fade away.

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London August 2016