

**LITERACY AND THE MEDIA**  
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In early 2004 Tessa Jowell, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, announced that “media literacy is as important as maths or science”. Her statement was met with various kinds of incredulity. That a culture minister should have the temerity to pronounce on matters relating to the school curriculum was bad enough; that she should propose “media studies in the primary school”, as the *Daily Mail* put it, was clearly insane. It was therefore perhaps wise of the Department of Education to remain silent on the topic, but can it continue to do so?

Perhaps it can. Now that responsibility for fostering media literacy has been enshrined in the Communications Act (2003) as a responsibility of Ofcom, the new regulatory body for electronic media, there seems every possibility that the concept could conveniently shrink to a small and well-defined set of skills. Media literate “consumer-citizens”, as Ofcom likes to call us, will be able to launch a browser, do their tax returns online, announce family events by mobile phone, put their children to bed before the watershed and register complaints about bad language in *EastEnders*. Market forces, rather than expensive curricular initiatives, will ensure that they acquire these skills, so that schools can continue to concentrate on “the basics”, which are, presumably, those skills that the marketplace won’t deliver.

I would like to think that this is an over-pessimistic scenario. We know that the concept of teachers as “informed professionals” is beginning to gain ground. Money is being spent on the development of lead practitioners and classroom-based research; the Tomlinson report proposes a stronger role for teachers as assessors in the new 14-19 qualifications structure. Is it too much to hope for a rethink of what we really mean by literacy, without being terrorised by the *Daily Mail*?

Such a rethink might start, daringly, with a new look at children’s “pre-literacy” experiences. We know that they watch an enormous amount of moving image media. Televisions are on in many homes for much of the day, and it’s common practice for parents to use television or video as a child-minder. We also know that children’s engagement with the moving image is often quite active. They quickly identify favourite films and programmes. They use visual search on a video recorder to view and re-view segments of videos that they like, over and over again. They can do this by the time they are two and a half. So by the time they get to school, most children will have been studying moving image media for at least two years.

Is it really legitimate to use the word “studying” for that kind of activity? The conventional view is that time spent watching television and video is time wasted.

We're told it makes children less sociable, more obese, predisposed towards violence and sexual stereotyping, less able to concentrate, lacking in linguistic skills – a whole string of bad effects, presenting teachers with a problem that they have to overcome.

Whatever the value of such claims, it must also be true that if children have spent all that time with TV then they must have learned something, because little children do not waste time. They learn. They may not learn what we want them to learn, but everything they encounter or do contributes to their learning: they learn more at that age than they ever will at any other stage of their lives. So rather than dismiss all that TV watching as useless, let's consider what they may have learned from it.

Research shows<sup>1</sup> that children who can demonstrate good comprehension of television narratives at the age of five are highly likely to become good readers by the time they are eight. This is because their pre-school years of watching TV and video have developed a range of skills that will play a significant role in their later learning. First of all they have learned to decode the language of moving image media, for example: the conventions that govern how close-ups are used; eye line matching; the use of jump cuts or dissolves to convey the passage of time. The *Daily Mail* might snigger at the triviality of such knowledge; you might be bristling at the jargon: but the fact is that we have all learned those conventions, whether we can articulate them or not, and we could not understand TV or film without them.

Secondly, young children have acquired a range of generic comprehension skills that can be applied to different media. Before you can follow the structure of a story you need to learn that stories have a structure, and that different kinds of story can have different kinds of structure. Before you can identify different kinds of story you need to learn that stories can be of different kinds, and that there are rules that govern these differences. These very basic concepts eventually enable children to predict story events in different genres. They also learn that characters may sometimes be types rather than unique, and that character can be signalled by certain conventions of appearance, dress, behaviour and so on. Thus skills of inference can be built up, long before children encounter written texts.

It would be hard to argue that these skills are not a useful basis for the development of literacy. But our culture's superstitious dread of the one-eyed monster in the living room encourages teachers to disdain children's media knowledge and regard it as separate from, and inferior to, the "real knowledge" which constitute reading and writing.

What would it look like if, instead, teachers felt confident about working with this knowledge and building on it? An important initial step would be to recognise that film, television and video are useful stepping-stones to the acquisition of

traditional literacy. When teachers take account of children's early audio-visual experiences, encourage children to talk about them, and show videos in class for discussion and as a stimulus, then that clearly helps children to become competent readers and writers.

However, this is not enough. Unless teachers also recognise that film, television and video are more than just stepping-stones, but valuable cultural forms in their own right, then a huge area of children's development is being ignored. In what other area of the curriculum would we leave it to the commercial marketplace to determine subject content? To say that teachers have a responsibility to develop children's moving image media knowledge sounds dreary and burdensome. But in fact teachers do have a thrilling opportunity to offer children unforgettable experiences, both in watching unusual and challenging films and in experimenting with moving image computer software to make their own creative statements. Some teachers are already doing this<sup>ii</sup>, but many more would like to and are inhibited by the perception that it's not "proper" classroom activity: that their head teacher, or Ofsted, wouldn't like it.

We have to get away from the idea that media literacy is separate from literacy and will represent an additional burden to teachers. We also have to get away from the perception of media literacy as an extension of Media Studies, dependent on heavy theory and specialist jargon. Nor do we need the deficit model in which media literacy is all about protecting children from Internet predators and avaricious advertisers. What we do need is an acquisition model of media literacy<sup>iii</sup>, which offers essentially desirable experiential and learning gains, that promises to develop children's individual potential, and that can be seen as a positive benefit to our culture and to society.

Philip Pullman recently proposed analogies between Stalinist Russia, Khomeini's Iran and, potentially, Bush's America.<sup>iv</sup> He characterised them all as "theocracies", but argued that the links between them had less to do with religion than with the important distinction "that theocracies don't know how to read, and democracies do". In theocracies, he says, the interpretation of all texts is provided by powerful groups – priests, commissars, wealthy elites, global corporations. In democracies, citizens must have the freedom – and the skills – to make their own interpretations of texts. It would be bizarre if that distinction referred only to written texts. Our texts take many forms, and it's time our literacy reflected that fact.

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<sup>i</sup> See for example “Role of Early Narrative Understanding in Predicting Future Reading Comprehension” by Kathleen E. Kremer, Julia S. Lynch, Panayiota Kendeou, Jason Butler and Paul van den Broek, University of Minnesota, and Elizabeth Puzles Lorch, University of Kentucky, paper presented at AERA Conference 2002, and available at [www.ciera.org](http://www.ciera.org).

<sup>ii</sup> The Primary and KS3 Strategies are supporting such work, using the BFI resources *Starting Stories*, *Story Shorts* and *Screening Shorts*, and the BFI teachers' guides *Look Again!* and *Moving Images in the Classroom*. For more information on these resources and linked training, see [www.bfi.org.uk/education](http://www.bfi.org.uk/education).

<sup>iii</sup> See Kathleen Tyner (1998) *Literacy in a Digital World* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), Chapter 8, pp 153-165.

<sup>iv</sup> Philip Pullman, “Text, Lies and Videotape”, *Guardian Review*, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2004, pp 4-5.