History of Media Lit, part 2: Crash Course Media Literacy #3

Crash Course: Media Literacy
https://youtube.com/watch?v=9iUjvNtgWAs
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/9iUjvNtgWAs

During our last lesson we went way, way back to Ancient Greece where people were still a bit wary of the written word. We looked at how the printing press revolutionized literacy and later, how the newspaper became the first mass media. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

At the turn of the 20th century, around the peak of the penny press wars, another medium was about to go boom. The first motion pictures were shown in the 1890's, and popular culture as we know it took its first steps off the printed page.

Just three decades later, it would take another step forward, and then another. Radio broadcasts soon brought the news, music and more right into people's homes. By the 1950's television sets joined in. Just 40 years after that personal computers and the internet revolutionized the media landscape again.

With each step forward in technology, new challenges to media literacy popped up. Before mass media, people were concerned over access to media – who is literate, what info can they get, and how do they get it?
But in first half of the 20th century, concerns shifted to analyzing and evaluating media. What messages are being sent, and is the public able to handle them?

If Martin Luther and Gutenberg worried we didn't have enough media around, in the 20th century we start to worry if people have too much.

[Opening music]

It's the 20th century, and everywhere you turn there are films and radio broadcasts and TV shows. And lawmakers and educators and parents begin to resist all these new, popular, mass media. Often they insisted that the public (and especially children) were in grave danger.

These organizations and individuals weren't the media literacy advocates we think of today, encouraging us to dive into the media deep end and swim around. They were more like your swim coach covering you up in floaties before you even reach the pool: too strict and a little weird. This type of media literacy is called protectionism.

As modern media scholar David Buckingham describes it, protectionism comes different forms. There's cultural defensiveness, where certain types of media ares in said to have less cultural value than others. There's political defensiveness, where the people must be protected from false beliefs and ideologies. Then there's moral defensiveness, where the effects of sex, violence, and consumerism in media are the biggest concern.

Cultural defensiveness is maybe best described by the phrase, "They don't make 'em like they used to!" Each generation has a moment where what it loves loses popularity in exchange for something new. And when that happens, the older generation often dismisses the newest media product as less worthwhile.

Television was a big target of this type of protectionism. When TV got really popular in 50's and 60's, a wave of academics and educators thought it would rot everyone's brains. If you've found yourself complaining about youths and their Snapchats and their Netflix and their selfies, you have fallen prey to cultural defensiveness.

Political defensiveness is used whenever someone is worried the media might be secretly swaying opinion or guiding public action – like propaganda, subliminal messages, claims that candy corn actually tastes good. That sort of thing. Whenever a new medium exerted power over the public, fears of its use by foreign agents to persuade and confuse followed.

By the late 1940's and early 1950's, for instance, there was a lot of hand-wringing over the power of Hollywood studios. After the First and Second World Wars, government committees were formed to clear the film industry of feared communist influence. Luckily, we don't have to worry about foreign influence in our media today, right people? Right?

Moral defensiveness focuses on the content of media, and their ability to "corrupt young minds." This version of protectionism remains a popular hangout for media literacy advocates. When a new media trend comes along that doesn't jive with their societal norms – think about violent video games or sexy music videos or books about boy wizards – moves are made to "protect the children."

Moral defensiveness can lead to a moral panic. Coined by South African sociologist Stanley Cohen, a moral panic is the reaction of the public to a perceived threat to social norms. Legislators, educators, and parents learn about, get concerned by, then act to neutralize that threat. Those perceived threats are often based on stereotypes, racism, or sexism.

For instance, moral panics have dogged the history of popular music, especially music made by Black Americans. In the 1950's, Rock n Roll became super popular with teenagers of all colors and its most popular figures were black. This raised fears among some suburban white parents that it would promote interracial dating and sexualized behavior. A similar cycle of moral panic followed the rise of jazz in the 20's and rap in the 80's and 90's, too. Hip hop, for one, is still sometimes referred to as "not music."

Moral Panics are all about the content of messages. Will seeing a movie star smoke make kids smoke? Will doing the twist on the dance floor lead to doing the twist elsewhere?

Luckily, protectionism isn't the only version of media literacy. The modern shift in media literacy began in the 1960s, and started to argue that empowering students to use media could help them navigate it in the real world. A good, critical understanding of media could even make you a better citizen.

A big part of this shift was the work of Marshall McLuhan, arguably the most popular media theorist of the 20th century. McLuhan was a true public intellectual, sharing his theories through TV talk-shows and bestselling books. His famous 1967 book *The Medium is the Massage* – whose title was a play on The Medium is the Message - theorized that the way we communicate is more important than what we communicate. He wanted media scholars to study the methods of content delivery, in addition to the content itself.

McLuhan wrote, "The personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs...by any new technology."

The gist of this theory is that any new medium changes how we think. The important part of a message isn't what it's saying. It's how its delivery changes our relationship to the outside world.

Let's head to the Thought Bubble to break that down.

Take this Facebook post. It's from an acquaintance of yours. The message of this post? Well, it's your acquaintance's mom's birthday! Very exciting! Of course, they never straight up say, "My mom was born on this day many years ago." But you get it from the photo and the cutesy caption.

But let's look beyond the message. Before Facebook, would you

have known the birthday of a not-so-close friend's mom? Probably not. So, why'd they post it on Facebook, specifically?

Maybe they knew their mom would see it and it would make her day brighter. Maybe they knew other people would see it and wish their mom a happy birthday. Maybe, they knew their whole family would see it, and they'd look like the best child ever.

Why the cutesy photo? Well, that's how everyone is doing it these days. You can't just write, "Happy b-day mom." That sounds a little stale or even robotic. What if all your Facebook friends scroll right past that tiny text message? The horror! So you pick out a retro photo of you and your mom looking adorbs. Totally normal.

Since Facebook was born, generations have formed new habits around sharing of info online with friends and family. Facebook as a medium has influenced not only what people say, but when and how they say it, and to whom.

As McLuhan would say, we shape our tools and then our tools shape us.
This is a crucial point to modern media literacy: it's not just the messages that affect us. It's the platforms, too.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So as media literacy blossomed, scholars started to study how media perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce social inventions like race and gender. As knowledge of these media effects grew, the focus of the field shifted again.

Instead of protecting consumers from media messages, media literacy now seeks to prepare them to receive and create them. Advocates are asking: when do consumers become creators? How do media help audiences make decisions? How can help we empower media users from a young age?

As technology makes media usage ubiquitous and all-consuming, digital literacy and news literacy have become critical tools. Digital literacy is the set of skills required to use digital media; knowing how to access the internet, how to send an email, or what a meme is. But also, how to avoid getting Catfished, or avoiding addiction to your mobile apps.

News literacy is the set of skills needed to navigate news media specifically;
what sources are trustworthy, how to share news responsibly, and how news is gathered. But also, in the age of "fake news," what truth means and how to avoid the filter bubble of like-minded internet users.

Finally, as social media continue to take up more of our media time, their influence on democracy has become a hot topic. Right this second, media literacy educators are teaching future generations of voters how to take action on the media they consume. And activists and scholars are fighting for net neutrality and industry regulations to ensure the free flow of information.

Media literacy and its goals have continued to shift and adapt to changing times. When media is "new," cycles of concern about its threat to safety, culture, and well-being repeat across the ages. And with each new medium comes a new need and a new skill set to learn. But with some critical thinking and the right combination of historical context and tech savvy, we're always prepared to forge ahead into the future.

We'll continue that forge next time on Crash Course: Media Literacy as we dive into how our brains react to information – in helpful and hurtful ways.

Until then, I'm Jay Smooth.

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