History of Media Literacy, part 1: Crash Course Media Literacy #2

Crash Course: Media Literacy
https://youtube.com/watch?v=oXf0F4GYzWQ
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/oXf0F4GYzWQ

Questions of media literacy – what it means, who should have it, and how they should get it – are as old as media itself. Technologies like smartphones and the internet have made media literacy more important than ever. But concerns about media and their effects have been around a long, long time. Many of the arguments for and against media have shaped how new technologies, industries, and cultures have developed throughout history.

Media literacy as a term or a field didn't become a thing until around the 1960's. Before it became the work of communications scholars and media professionals, thinking about communication was (and often still is) led by philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, linguists, and critical theorists. It's an ancient problem that even Plato, the classical Greek philosopher, thought a lot about.

[Opening music]

In the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue he wrote around 370 BCE, Plato imagines a conversation between his teacher, Socrates, and one of their friends, Phaedrus. Socrates and Phaedrus start off talking about love and end up debating the best way to give a speech. But you know what was really bugging Socrates, what he thought was the biggest problem in Greek society? Writing things down.

He writes, "If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls;
they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder."

That's right. Plato was dark. He thought leaving your words on paper, just lying around, would encourage others to use them out of context. If you were there in person, though, you could defend your thoughts and talk them out with the listener. And if you've ever said something dumb on the internet, you know the man's got a point.

So the root of media literacy concerns is really just straight up literacy, learning to read and write. In Plato's day, and for centuries after, information was often shared by word of mouth and, for most people, education was informal. If you were lucky - and rich - you might've shared info through hand-written media like letters and codices (a type of pre-book book). Or you might've studied alongside a master or scholar and learned from handmade manuscripts.

These were very expensive and time consuming to make, so very few people had the means to become educated and literate. But all that changed when Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable type printing press in 1452. Suddenly, print media was easier to produce, and books and pamphlets could be shared crazy fast – well, as fast as your fastest horse could go, this was the 15th century.

As media became cheaper, more people had the means to become literate.
For people in power, this was a huge problem. It's much easier for a government to control or persuade their subjects with the word of law when most of them can't read.

Organized religion had a similar problem. Before the printing press was invented, most of the church-going public couldn't even read the Bible; they relied on the clergy to interpret it. In 1517, German theologian Martin Luther started pushing the buttons of the Roman Catholic Church by publishing his 95 Theses. He claimed the church didn't and shouldn't have the only power to interpret scripture. He even translated the Bible from Latin to German to grant access to everyday people.

The idea that suddenly parishioners could interpret the Bible for themselves was a major shake-up. His revelations eventually led to the Protestant Reformation and a democratization of religion in the West. Though, Luther's impact wasn't all roses – today his more antisemitic views are pretty hard to stomach.

The history of media literacy closely follows the history of media technology – with each new invention, discussions and fears follow. Just as Plato was wary of the written word, government and religious leaders were very wary of the printed word. Those in power wanted to be gatekeepers for information – and prohibiting access to media, of course, makes media literacy impossible.

Media literacy really becomes important three centuries later, with a new medium – the world's first mass media: the newspaper. Publications of local news date back to Plato's era. But the type we think of today – a regularly published document quickly and cheaply covering major events for the masses – didn't really form until the 17th century.

And at first, to no surprise, most of them were government-controlled. But as the print media industry began to take shape, people fought for a free press. This was especially true in the American colonies, where the struggle for an independent press was tied up with their struggle for freedom from British control.

By the early 1800's the newspaper begins to become a democratizing force.
This is the era of the Penny Press. Called the Penny Press because they cost – you guessed it – a penny, these papers were incredibly popular. They spread like wildfire, especially among the middle and lower classes. Suddenly, anyone, even an unlikely street kid without two pennies to rub together could be in the know and feel like they were king of the world!

Newspapers weren't just about educating the masses. They were also about making lots of money. Penny paper owner Benjamin H. Day, printed this motto atop every issue of The New York Sun: "The object of this paper is to lay before the public, at a price within the means of every one, all the news of the day, and at the same time offer an advantageous medium for advertisements."

By the mid-1800's, the penny presses were making so much money from ads that people worried about publishers choosing profit over truth. The more publishers relied on advertising revenue to pay the bills, the more sensational papers became. This trend came to a head around the turn of the 20th century.

In the late 1890's, Joseph Pulitzer (Pulitzer like the Prize), a self-made, traditional newspaper man who owned the *New York World*, and William Randolph Hearst, a young mining heir who wanted to emulate Pulitzer and owned the *New York Journal*, went head to head.

They both wanted their papers in as many hands as humanly possible to attract bigger and better advertisers. The two papers began ramping up their stories, focusing less on getting the facts straight and more on getting more readers and more cash. This became known as Yellow Journalism.

Yellow journalists used bold, scary or misleading headlines; faked interviews and exaggerated stories. And used lots of splashy pictures and illustrations, and did anything else they could do to sell a paper. They prioritized sensationalism over professionalism and journalistic ethics. They thrived on scandals, sports, crime, and self-promotion. Good thing we don't have to worry about that kind of thing today.

Let's head into the Thought Bubble for a closer look.

Here we have a classic example from the peak of Yellow Journalism.

This article is from Pulitzer's *The New York World*, published in February 1898. The main front page story is about the sinking of a U.S. battleship, the Maine, in Havana Harbor a few days earlier. Cuba, which was colonized by Spain, was in the middle of a revolution.

The U.S.S. Maine was there as a show of power to protect U.S. interests in Cuban independence. But it was also a gesture to ease tensions that were growing between the U.S. and Spain. Then suddenly, in the middle of the night February 15, an explosion tore apart the Maine. It sunk, killing 260 men.

Let's take a look at this headline about the sinking.

"Maine Explosion Caused By Bomb or Torpedo?" - question mark. Well that's not a suspicious use of punctuation or anything. Even today, the cause of the Maine's sinking is unclear. A naval inquiry held in 1898 concluded a mine laid in the harbor had exploded.

But today, some experts believe the explosion was internal, caused by a coal bunker fire. Either way, two days later in 1898, no one knew what happened. But Pulitzer's paper didn't hesitate before taking a guess.

During their stand-off, both Pulitzer and Hearst stoked tensions between the U.S. and Spain to sell papers. With this headline the New York World helped to spread rumors about enemy involvement in the sinking.
Notice the huge, ginormous illustration. It takes up nearly the whole page!

This visual re-telling of the explosion – complete with bodies strewn around and flames shooting into the air – is so dramatic. Since the paper didn't have a photograph of the event, they dramatized it with a gory graphic to grab your attention.

Finally, take a look at the sub-headlines (often called the "deck" of a story). They're full of equally dramatic tales from the scene of the supposed crime. But if you look closely, the writing signals they're just feeding the rumor mill. The "facts" the article claims are really just suggestions and overheard talk, with no solid confirmed information.

Thanks Thought Bubble.

You can see from this example that Yellow Journalism isn't trying to sell truth and facts. It sells a story. By taking a closer look, we discover strategies publishers use to entertain or distract us – like staying away from the facts and leaning into drama. The race to sell as many papers as possible was – and still is – a race to the bottom. And publishers know all too well how to make a buck from a good story.

And in case you're wondering: They called it Yellow Journalism because Pulitzer and Hearst's papers fought over which one would print a popular comic called The Yellow Kid. It was a strange time.

Yellow Journalism, then and now, helps remind us of those ancient questions – what happens when we rely on media? Should everyone have access to it? What happens if that access is exploited?

Media literacy is nothing new, but it's adapting and changing all the time. Where media literacy once required a mastery of language and a quill,
the age of the penny press required the ability to analyze headlines at a glance and tell truth from sensationalism.

With every new medium, a new set of skills is needed to navigate it all – and we haven't even gotten to TV. That's for next time, during The History of Media Literacy Part II. For now, I'm Jay Smooth. We'll see you next week.

Crash Course Media Literacy is filmed in the Dr. Cheryl C. Kinney Studio in Missoula, MT. It's made with the help of all of these nice people, and our animation team is Thought Cafe. Crash Course is a Complexly production.
If you want to imagining the world complexly with us, check out some of our other channels like Eons, Animal Wonders, and SciShow Psych.

If you'd like to keep Crash Course free, for everyone, forever, you can support the series at Patreon, a crowdfunding platform that allows you to support the content you love. Thank you to all of our patrons for making Crash Course possible with their continued support.