MEDIA LITERACY AND THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

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Media literacy is needed in all aspects of a modern life. Today, we are witness to countless media messages without much guidance as how to interpret these different ideologies. Students are not being taught how to correctly interpret the media world around them. The goal of media literacy is to give students the tools to interpret media and empower them to be able to make informed decisions. If students can think critically while watching media, they will also be able to use these skills in their everyday lives. In the United States, media literacy theory has greatly evolved since the times of Marshall McLuhan. However, media literacy in the classroom has been largely ignored for a plethora of reasons. Simultaneously, technologies have advanced to the point where information instantly flows from one source to another. Young scholars use these technologies without critically analyzing the media texts they consume. The goal of this study is to give future academics and activist resources to create media literacy websites targeted at high school aged students. Also, to better prepare young people for the onslaught of media messages, cultural theory is a necessary component of contemporary pedagogy and therefore this project adjusts university level educational material to make it accessible to high school students. This study closely examines classical and contemporary media literacy theory, conducts a textual analysis of two websites that use the tenets of media literacy (for very different reasons), and finally uses this data to present the content of a sample media literacy website.
I dedicate this thesis to my loving parents (Bob and Cindy). Without their support and knowledge I wouldn’t be where I am today.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. MEDIA LITERACY THEORY</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. MEDIA LITERACY TURNED UPSIDE DOWN: NICK.COM V. DON’T BUY IT</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. EMERALD LENS: A MEDIA LITERACY WEBSITE</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website Notes, Brief Introduction, and Website Mission</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction and Methods</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Media Section</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience Section</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overarching questions</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website Chart</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website Site Map</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Media literacy is needed in all aspects of a modern life. Today, we are witness to countless media messages without much guidance as how to interpret these different ideologies. Students are not being taught how to correctly interpret the media world around them. The goal of media literacy is to give students the tools to interpret media and empower them to be able to make informed decisions. If students can think critically while watching media, they will also be able to use these skills in their everyday lives. Media literacy is a skill that will improve upon all facets of a person's life through giving him or her the ability to think for themselves and challenge hegemonic discourses. The following thesis aims at creating an online space for media literacy theory to flourish while also creating a practical space to give young students an early chance to start gaining these skills. My main research question is therefore, if it is possible to use media literacy theory in order to create a new space on the Internet that is both educational and at the same time challenging and entertaining.

Background

As a Master's level student in Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University, I am lucky enough to instruct introductory popular culture classes. In my experience, the students that take popular culture have little to no experience in critically observing media. In fact, it is scary to realize the lack of critical skills in the majority of my adult students. Furthermore, in terms of production, my students have no clue who produces their goods or entertainment let alone the places where they originate. One purpose of popular culture as a discipline is to give students the tools from cultural studies to be able
to mediate these realms of powerful cultural institutions and simultaneously understand the different paradigms that control our lives and world.

Also, the benefit of using popular culture in media literacy is that we can connect to kids through entertainment that they actually enjoy. In my experience, the best way to help students understand cultural studies is to use examples that they are most familiar with. While math and science are very valuable and enjoyable to some popular culture can be just as effective in terms of teaching students how to think critically. We as educators must learn how to connect with modern students. How can we make education fun again? The value of popular culture is that it adapts into many different teaching environments and can be used in many different disciplines.

However, without young people gaining a critical lens at an early age, it becomes much harder to get them to intellectually move outside of their comfortable paradigm. It is difficult for anyone to think about ideas that are not “normal” to them, but perhaps if we started teaching these ideas at an earlier age we could empower these students with the tools they need to succeed in an environment that has been so saturated with media. One cannot escape the power of Popular Culture, and therefore needs to be able to decode the many different meanings that lie below the surface of these texts. As I tell my students, we as scholars don’t want to change people’s views, rather we would like them to be able to examine the world from different points of view and perhaps become more aware of the power and influence of media on modern society. I believe this is the first and most important step toward creating a group of people who can make wise decisions about the future of our planet. Thinking critically in all aspects of their lives will give
them the agency to be able to change their consumption habits to reflect their beliefs and be simply more aware of the power and influence of corporations on everyone’s lives.

In my frustration, I joined forces with my colleague and fellow Popular Culture Master's student Katie Barak. Together, we decided that we should work on a project in order to bring our dream of media literacy to the forefront of education. Both of us have had the opportunity to work with youth services and are able to apply the many lessons learned at these organizations to this project. We decided that the best way to introduce students to media literacy would be through using a medium which is most familiar to them, the Internet. We decided to create a website dedicated to media literacy that would keep local Ohio educational benchmarks in mind (This is more Katie's focus than my own) as well as being fun and educational for high school aged students.

In entering this project, we both understood that we needed to build a knowledge base in order to succeed. I have some experience in web design, but the technology has changed a lot since I last worked on anything similar to this project. Therefore, we needed to talk to many people who understood web design. This actually was one of the hardest portions of the entire project because while we have many friends who are strong in web design, few of them have the time to work on a project for free. Also, our time was constrained due to our course load and a major comprehensive examination, so we couldn’t take classes in order to be more up to date in design and construction of websites. Therefore, we could only really hope to accomplish our goal through trial and error and examining the makeup of other websites. In chapter two of my thesis, I examine two websites that I feel exemplify the importance of media literacy and give us important models to follow.
Also, simply in an effort to work together, Katie and I faced several obstacles. Firstly, a joint thesis is unheard of in our program and therefore we had to modify the ways in which we presented the material. In effect, we split the work in half and decided to use different theoretical frameworks in order to be allowed to accomplish the project. Also, we faced a lot of opposition because of the scale of our project, which in many ways was justified because of the amount of work required to build and maintain a website. I believe that even though our advisors may have been right, academia is all about trial and error and building upon theories in order to use them practically. While the official website is not up and running (which I will discuss in the conclusion of this paper), the theory we have compiled and used as well as the content we have created will be valuable resources to those who come after us.

**Theoretical Framework**

In order to obtain this goal, myself and another popular culture masters student (Katie Barak) have set forth on creating a media literacy website targeted at high school students. In addition to this, I wrote a thesis on digital media literacy, focusing specifically on the application of media literacy on the Internet. In my research, I have found that there really aren't adequate online spaces for high school students that incorporate critical thinking and popular culture. While there are many options for the consumption of entertainment on the web, often we are not trained to look beyond the superficial. I am specifically interested in examining the way in which current media literacy websites construct media literacy and how it is presented to a younger audience. In writing this thesis, I gathered information that informed the content of our website.
Once the website is functional, we would like to take it into classrooms and run workshops with it. The future goal, in a PhD program, is to use the website in high school classrooms in order to analyze their use of the Internet and to gather data about how young people decode popular culture. In this way we can simultaneously benefit the community and gather data for future work. Personally, I believe that including community development in this project is the ideal situation for academics.

In this, there is a great opportunity for both the academic and local communities to benefit. By creating a website that is advantageous to both parties, college level education moves further from the stereotypical ivory tower and succeeds in placing itself firmly in the locality that supports its growth. Importantly, a future examination of the atmosphere toward scholarship of engagement, or research that involves and benefits local communities, is necessary in order to add to the future goals of this project as well as help to create a practical way of dissemination and creation of the website. While there is not room in this text to speak much more about scholarship of engagement, future works must delve into this important field in order to continue work with the community. For a project such as this to be successful, one must have the approval and assistance of the local population.

I feel that the definition created by the Center for Media Literacy blends with our expectations of media literacy for this project:

Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of
inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy. (Center for Media Literacy)

This definition points to the possibility of media literacy helping students understand the role and importance of media in today's society. It also implies that this type of education can teach students to read texts as well as create their own. While media literacy is very useful, an educator must also understand that he or she has an obligation to give students the tools to survive in the world today. Hopefully in giving students the tools to think critically about media, we will also allow them to have a lucrative career in media while applying the lessons they have learned.

One of the main texts I use in this project is Developing Media Literacy in Cyberspace: Pedagogy and Critical Learning for the Twenty-First-Century-Classroom by Julie D. Frechette. In her work, she lays out a theory of media literacy that is very helpful for my project. While she only spends a few pages on it, I will first expand her analysis of McLuhan's and others’ work and used her bibliography to expand my own sources. Also, she has a very interesting section on the pros and cons of telecommunication and computer usage in the classroom which is also relevant to the media literacy theory and practice section of this thesis. While she examines specific schools, I examine online sites that are not built for any one school in particular. However, the way that she analyzes the sites was helpful to my textual analysis section.

I also find Joshua Myrowitz’s Multiple Media Literacies to be incredibly helpful in further defining media literacy. His three different ways of examining media literacy will help to further expand the methods that will be incorporated into the site.
There are at least three different types of media literacy, each linked to a different conception of what we mean by the term media. The notion that media are conduits that carry messages points to the need for media content literacy. The idea that media are distinct languages suggests the need for media grammar literacy, that is, understanding the use of production variables within each medium. The conception of media as environments suggests the need to grasp the influence of the relatively fixed characteristics of each medium (medium literacy both on individual communications and on social processes in general). Medium literacy, in particular, offers some special thoughts into the origins, problems, and possibilities of the media literacy movement. (1)

These three different ways of looking at media literacy are incredibly important to creating an educational website. Firstly, that media carries messages, second that media uses a distinct language that we need to learn in order to understand these messages, and lastly, that media creates environments in which we understand the world. These are all lessons that we need to incorporate in our website in order to give young people the tools to examine the media world around them. Unfortunately, many of the media literacy texts, like the one above, function solely to tell us what needs to happen without offering much practical application. The issue is that while there is a lot of theory out there, it seems that it is not being put use through digital education. So, while we build the
foundations for this website, there are few preexisting websites to work from. Therefore, we must examine those that function in a similar way in order to find out what aspects of these online spaces work and what doesn't for our purposes.

**Methods**

My colleague and I decided that the best way to use media literacy theory in a practical way would be to create a website because they are accessible to lots of students and young people are accustomed to using them. We chose to target high school students because we feel that they are at an age where they can handle higher and more abstract thought as well as being able to be more mature about sensitive topics that we would like to explore. The Internet has become a space where self-education has grown tremendously. Websites like Wikipedia are now sources that students (and faculty) use on a regular basis. While this can be problematic due to the nature of user created information, it still can be a valuable resource. Our website, on the other hand, will be more legitimate because of our own transparency (meaning allowing students to explore our own positionality to the work) and use of credible sources. As students use the Internet more and more as a source of information, educators must enhance this medium in order to reach them in new ways. As Marshall McLuhan believed (I explore this in more depth later in this paper) education must evolve with the time and can no longer be relegated to only the classroom. Computers, cell phones, and other gadgets that hook to the Internet (gaming devices even!) are all newer technologies that young people will be using as their primary sources of information. How can we take advantage of these new technologies to disseminate educational information? The answer is to create entertaining
and educational spaces that take advantage of the medium in order to reach young people at in a comfortable environment.

My research shows that there are not many texts that directly speak to the creation of websites specifically for media literacy, and therefore we will have to use media literacy theory in a new way by applying it to our website. We are breaking new ground in focusing on young people because most websites that deal with media literacy only have sections for adults and/or teachers. Our website is important because it speaks directly to the target audience and cuts out the middle man. While we want to make the site usable for teachers, we primarily want young students to be able to use our website on their own time.

**Website**

The website is named “Emerald Lens,” (named after the glasses that allowed one to see the emerald city in the *Wizard of Oz*) and will be a work in progress. At this point, due to technical and time requirements, the website is not up and running, but much of the content has been written. Much in the same way as other websites, “Emerald Lens” will be constantly changing in order to better fit its users needs. Our online space was created in order to serve the needs of media literacy for high school students while being interesting and fun. In order to organize the site, we decided to section it off by medium: TV, Internet, Film, Music, and Advertising (which uses many different mediums, but we thought deserves its own space). Organization was one of the hardest decisions during this whole process because websites do not function in the same way as linear texts. When someone writes a book, the expectation is that the viewer will read all the way
through, from left to right. The difference with the Internet is that it doesn't function in the same linear way, therefore we needed to create a space that would allow for flexibility. As shown in the section on the website, the site has not been organized in linear lessons and the goal is to allow students to pick and choose what they want to learn about. For example, I can click on a section dealing with audience and the Internet, read through it – complete the attached exercise and then jump to film and product placement. This style allows students to work at their own pace and create their own lesson plan each time they visit the site. Ideally, with future research, we would use copyleft (or free) videos in order to give more concrete examples and to make the site more interesting and flashy.

The mission statement for the site is: “Media literacy is an often overlooked component of education in young peoples’ lives. Contributors to the Emerald Lens have noticed a lack of critical thinking skills in many young people coming to college. Our objective is to create a space in which media literacy is introduced to a high school aged audience in a creative and entertaining way while encouraging a high level of critical thinking. In order to be relevant to modern classrooms we have attempted to work with No Child Left Behind guidelines to fulfill much needed content for the critical thinking components of state mandated educational benchmarks. Emerald Lens believes that educators can better connect with their students through the use of popular culture. The majority of the site uses contemporary examples and encourages young people to use examples from their own lives in order to teach in a way that maintains relevance.

While our website is not up yet, our project is still important to media literacy today. In this paper I examine the theory behind media literacy and its application to
digital education, I conduct a close analysis of two websites in order to gain resources for “Emerald Lens,” and I have written half the content for the website itself. The importance of a project like this is tremendous because the youth of the United States are simply not receiving the guidance to be able to navigate media themselves in an effective way.

Media literacy is of crucial importance to the lives of everyone in contemporary society and educators must start introducing it as a concept at early ages. Students are more than capable of understanding and using these lessons in their everyday lives.
CHAPTER 1 – MEDIA LITERACY THEORY

Throughout my experience teaching with the Popular Culture Masters Program, I have come to realize that there is a lack of critical media literacy in our students. While our world becomes more media fixated, young people are seemingly less conscious of, as Walter Benjamin puts it, “The Story Teller.” (Benjamin, Arendt) The “Story Teller” is the incarnation of all the messages we receive and decode, understood as a subjective paradigm. Simply put, he/she is our consciously biased source of information. Story tellers traveled from place to place disseminating knowledge prior to the invention of mass media, but those who received the stories were conscious of being presented this one-sided information from a specific perspective. Today, on the contrary, messages are encoded as the unquestioned truth. On the one hand, young people today are brand conscious and more powerful consumers at earlier ages. On the other, they are educated by No Child Left Behind standards that have placed a greater emphasis on standardized testing than on the creation of critical citizens. Students, at least in our experience, seem to be unaware of the biased and politically oriented world around them. We, as academics, need to somehow re-appropriate the concept of “The Story Teller” and apply it to media literacy programs in high schools.

The most cited theoretical pioneer of media literacy is Marshall McLuhan. Interestingly enough, McLuhan was actually a technophobe. According to one of his former students, he didn’t own an automobile for many years and never had a vacuum cleaner. McLuhan was actually very resistant to the use of new technologies, including the typewriter. He instead wrote old fashioned even for the 1950’s, with pen and paper.
As Donald Theall writes: “These are not just gossipaceous biographical facts, for they provide a key insight into one aspect of the depth of McLuhan’s schizoid approach to his world – an approach that is even more significant in typifying the split-person of the twentieth century, ensnared in a rupture of thought and feeling” (Theall 21-22). This also gives some insight into why his writing can be sometimes so frustrating to follow.

According to Ronald Deibert, McLuhan gets his message across “…through his idiosyncratic writing style, which was peppered with online aphorism and gross generalizations that became catch-phrases of the decade” (Deibert 22). Importantly, Deibert points to the simplistic nature of many of McLuhan’s arguments. While McLuhan does point to the importance of the changing of modes of communication, simultaneously, he creates further confusing binaries in order to understand these new technological innovations. In effect, McLuhan divides media into “hot” and “cold” categories; hot being media that requires only a single sense to decode; cold being media that requires audience participation (22). In effect, a form of hot media would be film because one primarily uses one sense, vision, in order to decode messages. McLuhan argued that this was a passive way of understanding information. On the other hand, a form of cool media would be television or the telephone because one must more actively interact to decode these meanings (Deibert 23). He is basically saying that one needs to think more in one medium than another, which is almost impossible to prove.

Unfortunately, these theories have little practical use because McLuhan doesn’t back up these statements. The theories of hot and cold media simply don’t make sense. This is a prime example of McLuhan’s sensationalism, which made him a very important figure during the 1960’s, and yet not really give much substance to the medium theory
movement because of his lack of applicability to media literacy theory. “Hot” and “cool”
media was moving in an academic direction, but it was far from being something useful
to use in understanding media, especially for young students of Cultural Studies.

In his popular (in the sense of it being the most condensed and non-academic) book, Medium is the Massage (1967), he refers to children living as both adults and young people simultaneously because of the way in which they are exposed to “adult” television. In emphasizing that the concept of youth was constructed in the 17th century, he implies that young people are not being educated to deal with these contemporary adult situations. In fact, he compares education to Fordist assembly lines without much substance. He states that “mere instruction will not suffice” (McLuhan 18). Accordingly, he insists that young people are not allowed to reach their “traditional heritage of mankind” through “technological awareness.” While he doesn’t explain in detail exactly what this “traditional heritage of mankind” may be, one may infer is that he speaking of passing down valuable information from generation to generation. If educational institutions are to ignore the importance of, as he calls it, electronically processed data to the lives of young people, they will severely miss out on both an educational tool and close examination of that to which we are most exposed. McLuhan states that “many of our institutions suppress all the natural direct experience of youth, who respond with untaught delight to the poetry and the beauty for the new technological environment, the environment of popular culture. It could be their door to all past achievement if studied as an active (and not necessarily benign) force” (100). Importantly, he points to the significance of media in young people's lives and the great potential it has to be a tool for educators. McLuhan believes that students were being alienated from the system because
they were only being taught by traditional means. A technological determinist by heart, he goes as far as to say that there is a “civil war” between these different media environments which represent the outside world and the world created within the traditional classroom. Also, he expresses that there needs to be a shift from education to discovery, meaning that rather than just imposing ideology we must give students the tools to gain knowledge themselves (100).

While McLuhan is important to examine because of his excitement and passion for technology and a literate public, he does little to explain practical ways to implement his ideas. Also, his technologically deterministic stance loses the importance of cultural frameworks surrounding new technologies. Importantly, though his argument that education needs to move toward discovery is crucial in capturing the attention of contemporary young students. We believe that through creating a Media Literacy website that focuses on analyzing popular culture, we can create a space that allows students to discover knowledge for themselves. In turn, we can introduce them to theories of popular culture that they would otherwise have no exposure to in high school. In effect, our project is where theory and practice are intermixed. In our research, we found extensive information on media literacy programs, but not many that were implementing cultural studies theory into their curricula. In the spirit of Marshall McLuhan, we would like to create an educational website that is critical but also enjoyable and fun.

To continue with a brief history of media literacy and its theories, we must also examine a little known academic named John Culkin. According to the Center for Media Literacy website, John Culkin was the man who invented media literacy. In my own research, the credit has always gone to the likes of Marshall McLuhan, but as in the
previous section, we have determined his work to be mostly fluff that doesn’t really give practical solutions to media theory. Surprisingly, very little is written about John Culkin other than a few articles on the CML website and a Wikipedia entry. His own academic work is even more difficult to find. However, it seems that Culkin may be media literacy’s forgotten advocate. In 1964, he stated that "The attainment of (media) literacy involves more than mere warnings about the effects of the mass media and more even than constant exposure to the better offerings of these media. This is an issue demanding more than good will alone; it requires understanding. And training in understanding is the task of the school!" (Moody, “John Culkin”, par. 1-3). So, Culkin believed that schools should be responsible for giving young people the tools to be critical thinkers in terms of different media forms. Of course, he was mostly talking about the proliferation of television to many homes in the United States, but this is a useful way to examine all forms of media. John Culkin was attempting to explain to us that one must not just complain about the dangers of an illiterate public, but also fight for the creation of understanding. Here “understanding” can be viewed as subjective (in the sense that there are many different ways to define understanding); however, I alternatively use the word “lens” instead. We must give people the tools to be able to examine the different lenses through which people view and represent the world.

Through a chance encounter, Culkin eventually became close friends with Marshall McLuhan and together they started a movement toward media literacy in classrooms. At Fordham University in 1964, he began to implement a structure of teaching and learning that would use film and television in association with humanities such as English literature and the arts. With this knowledge base, in 1969 he opened the
Center for Understanding Media Inc., whose main goal was to instruct teachers in understanding media (Moody, “John Culkin”, par. 4). Much in the same way many of the media literacy websites on the Internet cater to instructors, Culkin’s vision was to first instruct the teacher and then he believed the knowledge would, in effect, trickle down. The issue I have with this is that it suggests that teachers will actually go out and teach their students these methods. We must reach the students directly, especially at the level of education I feel they can achieve because often teachers do not have the tools or time to spend on media literacy instruction. In my research, most of media literacy in schools is conducted through library science classes which simply teach young adults how to determine valid sources on the Internet. We need to increase the level of intensity of education if we are to prepare students for the onslaught of media messages they receive on a daily basis. Also, incorporating media literacy with higher level cultural studies on a website is something that progresses Culkin’s dream further.

In his introduction to his doctoral dissertation called Why Study the Media? he emphasizes the importance of understanding media and its own “code” or meaning. He believed that one must understand and study both the form and content of communication. Importantly to the future of media studies, he was trying to emphasize the study of meaning of film in the classroom. He states: “The power of the moving image to manipulate, to editorialize and to form values and attitudes makes it imperative in this age of film and television that the audience be equipped with the competence needed to understand the rhetoric of the projected image.” (Culkin, Why Study, par. 1) The problem with Culkin's analysis is that he, much like McLuhan, is too technologically deterministic. To Culkin, the reason that we need to study film and other forms of media
is simply because they are new forms of media. He completely misses the cultural implications that surround media use. We watch film a certain way because we are trained to do so. Typically in most parts of the country, when one goes to enjoy a film he/she expects a dark, quiet experience with little interaction between audience and screen. But even this rule isn't always true because some cult films have traditionally encouraged audience participation. Media is cultural and we use it in different cultural ways. Form is less important than the way we utilize the technologies in our lives. This is another reason why adding cultural studies to media literacy is so important because students must not put their faith entirely in new technological forms.

Rather than spend more time on theorists who furthered media literacy, but are irrelevant today, I now will turn to one of the only books written about online media literacy. Julie D. Frechette wrote an excellent online media literacy book called Developing Media Literacy in Cyberspace: Pedagogy and Critical Learning for the Twenty-First-Century Classroom in 2002. Surprisingly, there is very little written on this subject even though media literacy has been around for over 50 years and the Internet as an educational site is nothing new. Frechette has created an excellent source of material for this paper and her brief review of theory was helpful in determining the relevant theories for a media literacy website. Here I would like to examine the core basic elements that make media literacy unique from other types of literacy projects. Firstly, she examines the important notion that “reality is socially constructed” (Frechette 26). In every Popular Culture course I teach at Bowling Green State University I strive to get this message across to my students. This is a crucial concept in Cultural Studies because it begins to argue against essentialist ideologies. The hardest part of getting through to
students is trying to get them to see that the way that they see the world appears to be normal because it has been constructed that way. The website portion of this thesis often uses the metaphor of a lens to understand media because we all examine the world through different frameworks of knowledge. In order for a student of media literacy to be able to understand how media works, he or she must first understand that what is normal is actually constructed by our environments around us. Often we take what is normal for granted because that is all we know. It is important to teach all students that we live in a socially constructed world and are products of our environment.

Frechette's second tenet of media literacy is that the “media constructs reality.” (26) Not only is it important to understand society's role in the way that we think and act, but also the power of the media. Many core Marxists like Adorno, Benjamin, and Barthes spoke of media as being incredibly powerful in persuading us to think in certain ways. Their theories are more relevant today than ever because of the ownership of many media outlets are by only a few people. The Culture Industry is more powerful today than it ever has been. Even while the United States becomes less dominant due to massive economic recessions, American ideologies are still distributed throughout the world because of these new communication technologies. Media outlets are very powerful and allow for little competition. One of the biggest shocks that I give students is when I give them the origins of the contemporary Santa Claus. Many are not aware of Coca-Cola's place cementing the jolly fat Santa Claus into the public’s mind by using an artist's painting for all of their winter ads in the early 1900's. Here there is a direct relationship between marketing and the way that people think that helps students understand the power of media to construct reality. There are other not so obvious examples in terms of the ways
in which race, class and gender are depicted in the media, but this normally takes longer for students to understand.

Thirdly, is that “audiences negotiate meaning in media” (26). Similarly to the way Stuart Hall explains his encoding/decoding model, Frechette explains the importance of being able to understand the differing ways that individuals understand messages. This is also a very important step in the way that academics understood the audience. Of course we are all going to understand the television show *The Hills* differently than the person next to us. We all have different backgrounds and frameworks of understanding that help us to understand the world around us. Particularly with teaching media literacy, it is important to give the audience agency simply to balance out power dynamics. Without an audience media would have no place in society. A large group of people must consume different types of media in order for them to be successful. If we all decided to simply shut off the television, *The Hills* would go off the air. However, in watching the show we still negotiate its many different meanings. The audience members are not simply passive viewers and can interpret messages very differently depending on their own backgrounds.

Fourthly, she states that we must examine the “commercial implications of media” or political economy (27). This is a very important part of media literacy because students often have no idea where their popular culture goods come from. Also, not only ownership but also the political nature of the economy at that time is significant. Many conservative films came out during the 1980's Reagan era, which reflected the political and economic values of the time. Students of media literacy must be able to understand economic trends and how they affect the media that they consume. Also, as Frechette
points out, media uses many marketing techniques and audience studies to determine what shows are popular. A television show must have a very large following in order for it to survive today’s brutal standards. So, many of the decisions made by giant companies are economic in nature. One must also be aware of the monopolies that many media outlets have over different communication technologies. Viacom, which I will speak of later in the piece, owns dozens of different television channels that millions of Americans watch daily. This sort of economic power includes the possibility of great hegemonic control over the messages we get every day. With this comes the exclusion of many groups from having voices in mainstream society. For example, if one wanted to start his or her own television channel, he or she would have to face the monopoly that these companies have. It is nearly impossible to create something that can economically subsist in this type of environment. Interestingly, I think that here one can use the case of the Internet as a possible venue in which independent media could flourish. Media literacy is inherently an economic issue.

Fifth is that, “media contain ideological and value messages” (27). In the Introduction to Popular Culture course, one of the foundational points of our course is to help students become aware of not only the ideologies of media, but also their own. I argue that one must be aware of how they view the world and the ways in which his or her own upbringings have affected those views in order to understand the workings of media. Just in the same way that Benjamin examines media as a form of Story Teller (Benjamin, Arendt), students would benefit from thinking about companies in this way. Many of my students have stated that my class “ruins” their ability to simply enjoy a film or to not over analyze an advertisement, but these are necessary skills in order to
comprehend the powerful nature of media. Media literacy helps a person to understand how media messages are encoded with many different meanings, some intentional and others less so. Students must be aware of these underlying messages because they reflect the social and political values of his or her own society.

Political values lead to Frechette's sixth element, the idea that “media have social and political implications” (28). Frechette argues that the growth of technology has limited the ways that families interact by taking social activities and making them more isolated; the argument is that people watch television too much. While I agree with her overall point, I think this argument is based on those who either do not use advanced communicative technologies or do not understand how younger generations interact. While the average American watch as more TV than he or she did 30 years ago, he or she isn't necessarily watching it by himself or herself. As a child growing up in the early 1990’s, I often had friends over or went to other’s houses to use these technologies. We watched TV together, we played video games together, and we kept in touch by phoning each other or texting each other constantly. Obviously there is a contradiction in that some of these technologies keep us closer together and at the same time limit our physical interactions, but we cannot dismiss the technology as being completely isolating. I think that many young people would argue that it in fact keeps them closer to their families and friends. Personally, my cell phone is really the only thing that keeps me in touch with most of my family because I live so far away from them. There is a danger in this type of analysis because it also tends to attach isolation to newer technologies. What is the difference between land line phones and cell phones? Obviously the answer is mobility and there is a lot to be discussed within that, but at the same time academics
forget regular phones because they are no longer relevant. We take these things for
-granted. So, in order to really get students interested in media literacy, we can’t simply
ignore the socially and politically positive aspects of these newer forms of technology.

The last media literacy element is that “form and content are closely related in the
media” (29). This tenant was one of the main reasons why our media literacy website was
categorized by different media. People understand and interact with media differently
depending on what medium they are using. Also, the languages of these texts are
different and one must be literate in all of these technological forms to understand the
power of today’s media. However, we must also keep in mind that many of these
technologies are now converging together to create something new. One can watch
television on his or her cell phone, can watch a movie on an mp3 player, or even search
the Internet on a video game console. We are becoming more and more connected to
fewer devices. One would rather carry around one communicative toy with all mediums
on it to make life less complicated. So, future studies must examine the changes in media
and how people use them. For now, it is still relevant to examine media separately, but at
the same time acknowledge that there is much overlap.

These seven elements have all been crucial in creating a foundation for our media
literacy website. With these in mind, the website also use have many aspects of cultural
studies as well as keep it grounded in practical applications. Praxis is incredibly
important in this project because we need to show students of media literacy that theory
can be useful in their everyday lives. I define Popular Culture as simply the study of
everyday life, and yet I don’t think academics often portray how these issues can directly
effect every aspect of our lives. In creating an interactive website, students have the
option to learn at their own pace and pick and choose what they want to know more about. The content and interface must be interesting and at the same time practical for young people's lives.

I would like to take a moment to examine my preferred definition of media literacy. Many texts use varying ways to describe this specific kind of literacy. However, according to Potter,

Media literacy is really the convergence of three huge bodies of knowledge: media studies (the industries, content, and effects), human thinking (how people attend to messages and construct meaning), and pedagogy (how to help people access information, develop skills, and become educated). Media literacy is not just the overlapping intersection of these three; instead, it is the entire realm covered by all three.

There are several definitions of media literacy, creating a vast spectrum of what is included underneath that umbrella heading. While some organizations like Media Awareness Network, Media Education Foundation, and National Communication Association define media literacy by solely examining tools and vocabulary – others look at criticality and the influence of media literacy like the Northwest Media Literacy Project, Sholle and Denski, Silverblatt and Eliceiri, and the Office of National Drug Control Policy (compiled in Theory of Media Literacy - W. James Potter). I feel that the definition created by the Center for Media Literacy blends with our expectations of media literacy:

“Media literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of
forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy."

In my opinion, the “media” in media literacy should include all message baring texts like television, radio, Internet, advertising, etc. Literacy is not just awareness, but the skills and ability to analyze, critically examine and dissect those media messages. This definition highlights the increasingly visual nature and demands of a technology-driven society. Additionally, the inclusion of media literacy’s encouraging role in the process of inquiry ties in with concerns regarding future generations of critically proficient public.

While I argue that media literacy is crucial to everyone’s education, there are still many obstacles to the process. Art Silverblatt says it best when he states that “one would think that the development of mass communication would eliminate the traditional barriers to media literacy. After all, one must be educated in order to read. On the other hand, all that is required to watch television is a strong thumb to operate the remote control. However, universal access to media should not be confused with media literacy” (Silverblatt 4). I think that this statement may be too strong in the sense that people must have some sort of literacy to be able to decode messages from any technology. Also, in making generalizations like this, one may turn people away from cultural studies because it often doesn't give any agency to the audience. However, this statement is useful in that one must not assume that literacy is the same as media literacy. While the audience can read texts, they may not have the tools to understand all of the media literacy elements discussed above.
Silverblatt discusses several obstacles that work against having a media literate public. Firstly, he points to elitism as a major issue to overcome. By elitism he means that many people believe that media has no effect on their lives. He points to a study which surveyed a cross section of people. Eighty percent stated that they believed that media had an effect on society while only twelve percent claimed that media directly impacts their lives. Also, a follow-up study indicated that respondent's level of education had little to do with the results of the survey (4). This information is very important when thinking about the creation and maintenance of a media literacy website. In my own experience as a teacher, students often follow this line of thought. It is very hard to push them to the point of even realizing the power of media, let alone it's impact on their own lives. We all like to believe that we are above the structural power of media, but there is no way to avoid it. Perhaps the more educators of media literacy become transparent in the ways in which media effects their own lives, the more students would be willing to admit it as well. Accordingly, a website really needs to create content that allows students to be self-reflective.

Secondly, Silverblatt points to the effective nature of media. Media are good at what they do! He points to how media use emotion to convey meaning which has been very effective in reaching out to the audience's visual and aural senses. He pointedly states that “consequently, the level of discourse about media programming is often reduced to emotional responses; in the words of Beavis and Butthead, programs are either ‘cool’ or they ‘suck’” (5). So, while we may want our students to be critical about what they watch, they have instead been trained to think in simplistic binaries. This leads to Silverblatt's next point, that audience behavior patterns effect the way one receives
messages. He claims that audiences are often engaged in multiple activities at once. When one is doing homework he or she may also be listening to music and have the television on mute in the background. Accordingly, media messages may slip through the cracks and become part of one’s behavior or attitude. Here, again I think that Silverblatt may be not giving enough credit to the audience. Many young people grow up participating in many different media activities simultaneously. Rather than examining this as being damaging, it shows that young people are adapt at multi-tasking and have the tools to think about many texts at the same time. Also, he states that audiences expect to not be disturbed while they watch their favorite television shows. Here, audiences are depicted as simply not wanting to analyze their favorite texts because they watch these shows in an individualistic manner (5). I again disagree with this negative view of audience reception. Many people watch television shows together, participate on the Internet with others, and use their media texts to communicate socially. While I would agree that maybe some audience members do not want to think deeply about their favorite programs, they still are thinking and interacting with each other.

The last three related obstacles to media literacy are the “nature of programming,” “credibility of media” and “complex language of media” (6). The nature of programming refers to the fact that media are not obligated to educate us. Media has always been around in order to make profit. Accordingly, we shouldn't expect them to give us the ability to think critically about the entertainment we consume. In an ideal capitalistic world, huge corporations could sell us just about anything without us complaining. Thus, we come to the credibility of media. Earlier, I spoke of Benjamin's Story Teller as being the ideal way to receive information through a knowingly biased source. Media and
entertainment has gained the status of objective truth. When one watches the news, he or she does not expect to have to think much past the stories that are being presented because news is supposed to be unbiased. Now of course with the proliferation of sensationalist news reporting, people are more aware of extremist news, but still seem to not be very analytical. In my experience, many young people do not even pay enough attention to news to really analyze it. Lastly, the sophisticated language of media is one of the most significant obstacles to media literacy (6). Many people take the power of language for granted. As Silverblatt believes, when people consume popular culture, they take for granted the many meanings within each image and word. Texts are naturalized and the viewer's interpretation is obviously the same as everyone else.

Another scholar, Barbara Warnick, also believes that one of the main issues facing media literacy is the naturalization of media. In response to a common argument amongst educators of media literacy, she states that “the naturalization and transparency of media representations can problematize the sort of public deliberation about media policy called for by McChesney” (Warnick 11). Again, the argument is made that discourse on media is limited its power. Often we take that which we use the most for granted and in this case we perpetuate a capitalistic society. At stake is the future of our society in terms of our own awareness of the power of media and the ways in which we consume goods. Media literacy is a goal that not only helps users to understand media, but also the ways in which they consume goods. The more we help students to understand that their lifestyle are constructed the better off the environmental and economic state of the world will be.
One last interesting point on this subject is the student's lack of questioning a media text's 'realness'. Cornelia Brunner and William Tally touch on this concept in their book *The New Media Literacy Handbook* when explaining the need for media literacy. In a postmodernist framework, our identities become fragmented partially because of our inability to determine what is real. Brunner and Tally use a case study where students are directed to create an image of an authentic cowboy. The participants examined many photographs, but none which satisfied their tastes. So, they cut pieces from many different pictures, assembled them on a paint program and used the composite picture to represent a real cowboy. The students believe that the picture is authentic because each portion of it came from an actual picture. To the authors this represents a state of confusion amongst our youth today. They both claim that media literacy can help alleviate this issue, but I wonder if this is a slippery slope argument where we can conclude that nobody knows what reality is. Obviously, students need to become aware of the manipulation of images in the media, but I think most are very aware of programs like Photoshop. Perhaps even using projects like the one above would help them to become more aware of the power of media and how images are often changed to fit certain stereotypes.

For a media literacy website it is imperative that we keep these obstacles in mind to truly be effective for young people. I argue that we need to accomplish this in such a way that will not alienate those we are trying to teach. While Silverblatt's arguments are especially helpful in helping us to think about the power of media, they are very negative toward the audience's agency. I agree that often people are not given the tools to think critically about their entertainment, but this does not mean that people do not think at all
while they watch their favorite shows. We must enter media literacy with the belief that audiences are intelligent, but may not have obtained the critical eye at an early age. One must create a website that is informative but at the same time celebrates the ingenuity of fan culture. Scholars like Stuart Hall and Henry Jenkins give much more agency to the audience than classical Marxists and we need to use these theories to promote further agency. While I too have become very jaded by witnessing the lack of criticality of my students, bashing their consumption habits may not be the best first step toward encouraging a media literate public.

In creating a more literate group of young people, we must use cultural studies in developing a media literacy website. Perhaps in order to solve many of these issues appearing to be condescending, we simply can use the tools of cultural studies to further relate to the lives of young people. In Speaking the Lower Frequencies: Students and Media Literacy, Jacobs quotes media scholar Douglas Kellner, who states “Cultural Studies is part of a critical media pedagogy that enables individuals to resist media manipulation and increase their freedom and individuality. It can empower people to gain sovereignty over their culture and enable them to struggle for alternative cultures and political change. Cultural studies is not just another academic fad but can be part of a better society and a better life” (Jacobs 41). Walter Jacobs, a sociology professor, then goes on to explain how he relates to his students by not only opening up about his own experiences with cultural studies and how they have affected him professionally, but also how he uses popular culture in the classroom to reinforce cultural studies practices. Many authors and scholars have pointed to this sort of teaching technique where culturally relevant media texts are used in order to grab the attention of an apathetic youth. Without
cultural studies, a media literacy project would simply reinforce many of the media messages we aim to fight against. The reason that we have used aspects of popular culture in our website is to move past what students are taught in their normal classrooms. Many media literacy texts focus on making students aware of what academic sources are most appropriate on the Internet, but this simply isn't enough material to empower individuals to fight against the power of media. As a scholar, I am not interested in simply giving students the tools to become future advertisers working for multi-nationals. Cultural studies, in its purest form, has the goal of empowering the public in order for them to change the way they view the world and possibly be able to make their lives better. Media literacy should borrow these ideas and incorporate them into its texts.

Online media literacy can use multiple intelligences theory, which allows for greater diversity of student learning. Multiple intelligences theory, created by Howard Gardner, claims that people learn in eight different ways (logical, verbal, visual/spatial, musical, bodily, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic) (13). Education consultant Julie Wood claims that the best way to use this theory is to understand that young adults all learn in different ways. While one may be proficient at musical learning, he or she may struggle interpersonally. She argues that we must be somewhat adept at all of these eight, but we all are better at some than others. Accordingly, education must use different tactics to allow students to learn in different ways (Wood 13-14). I think that our approach to media literacy, creating a website that is divided by medium, allows for a space where users can learn through different means. Also, in using a medium that is so
familiar to young people today, we are giving them an outlet that is not typical of the normal classroom setting.

In order to bring our discussion back to online media literacy we must revisit Julie Frechette. She states:

Accordingly, more thought needs to go into the curriculum development phase of Internet and computer use in the classroom. Despite the broad initiatives we've encountered that are focused on access to communication technology within Utopian virtual learning environments, the purpose of exploring cyberspace is obscured if the end goal of the learning venture is overshadowed by the means to get there. Likewise, it is not enough to seek out the destinations of our computer-based quests for knowledge. (Frechette 11)

We as academics must use the Internet in innovative new ways in order to connect to the modern student, but not get lost in the new technology. The Internet is a space in which media literacy can flourish, but it must be used carefully. The question becomes how can we keep a media literacy website fresh and interesting and at the same time also make it educational. In creating our website, we take some of the pressures of teaching off of teachers and give the students the space to use familiar technologies and not restrict them to the same old grind of classical pedagogy. Perhaps this was what Marshall McLuhan had in mind all those years ago.

**Conclusion**
While media literacy started with the simplistic visions of Marshall McLuhan and John Culkin, it has transformed into an innovative and important field. Medium theory is simply not useful in terms of thinking about media because it gives too much power to the technology itself. Also, McLuhan's own theories have little to no relevance to today's understanding of media and therefore can only be examined in their historical time period. On the other hand, the concept of looking at mediums may be useful for our website in order to create organization between lessons. One of the hardest parts of creating a website is the ordering of content. By starting with mediums, we can at least break up the information into different sections. While McLuhan may not be useful today, his ideas still carry much weight.

Julie Frechette has a more comprehensive way of examining media literacy and her theories are the foundations of our website. By looking at media in seven different ways, Frechette, without citing them directly, succinctly captures many aspects of cultural studies that we wanted to add to the site. The principles above will underpin many of the observations and lessons that will follow in the website itself. By looking at media in such a detailed way, students will have the ability to examine the world from a different paradigm. While we do not mention her goals directly in our website, these foundational observations are integral to media literacy as a field and help us connect to students.

Some of the obstacles to media literacy were mentioned in this chapter and are important to think about when working on this project. I think most importantly we must contemplate the elitism in terms of the way Jacobs describes it, but also in terms of how we as academics present ourselves. While many people may believe that they are immune
to the power of media, we must help them to understand that we are all affected by this powerful source of information and entertainment. Simultaneously, we must be as transparent as possible because we do not want to alienate those who need the tools to understand media literacy. On both ends, there needs to be understanding and the willingness to learn from each other. In order for our media literacy website to be successful it must be open enough to admit that we all are deeply affected by media.

In this chapter, I have briefly outlined the history of media literacy as well as its most important aspects for a media literacy website. I have discussed the many obstacles against this type of education and its potential solutions. I have argued for the importance of cultural studies in everyone's education and especially for young people today. Also, I have used multiple intelligence theory as a basis for this project and advocate this type of learning in all situations. Finally, I argued for further thought and discussion surrounding online media literacy and the use of the Internet in educational settings. The next section of this paper is a close textual analysis of two websites that use many of the aspects of literacy discussed above to teach young people how to read their texts. The purpose is to further our exploration of websites that use media literacy and incorporate these components into a future website.
Chapter 2 - MEDIA LITERACY TURNED UPSIDE DOWN: NICK.COM V. DON’T BUY IT

In the pursuit of the ideal media literacy website for young people, my colleague and I examined as many as we could find. In a digital world, one would think that if you search long and hard enough, you can find almost any bit of information through Google or another search engine. Unfortunately, this guise of an omniscient Internet is not always true. One would think that there would be many websites devoted to kids and media literacy, but the reality is that there is only one that mainly focuses on media literacy. One of the focuses of this paper is a website called Don’t Buy It, which is hosted by PBS. I will also examine a contrasting website for Nickelodeon called Nick.com. I think it is important to look at the ways in which these two sites are similar and how they differ because it will give us alternative ways to address issues of media literacy. Both utilize different techniques to try to maintain the attention of young people today. While one website teaches children not to buy, the other does the opposite and instills ideas of consumption at a very early age. One must be taught how to consume or not consume and how to read the many messages produced by mass media. I argue that in order for media literacy websites to be effective they must address issues relevant to young people in today’s society. Also, media literacy websites tend to miss several important aspects of well rounded cultural studies based education. Neither Don’t Buy It nor Nick targets the group of young people that I am interested in (high school aged students), but they are some of the few websites that actually address issues of media literacy.

The Nickelodeon channel is owned by one of the biggest conglomerates in the world, Viacom. Viacom owns: several cable networks; television; radio; outdoor;
entertainment; and video companies. Under the umbrella of Viacom, the company owns MTV, Nickelodeon, Nick at Night, VH1, Showtime, CBS and UPN television networks, King World Productions, Paramount Television, Infinity Radio, Paramount Pictures, Simon & Schuster; Paramount Parks' theme attractions and Blockbuster Inc (Funding Universe, par. 1). Obviously, the company has a strong influence on what we consume in the United States and even the world. Viacom was created in the 1970’s by CBS in order to appease the Federal Communications Commission’s decision to halt TV networks from owning cable TV systems (which is ironic because this ruling was later overturned). Without lingering too much on the history of the company itself, by 1999 (through the acquisition of many of its competitors through global deregulation in the 1980’s) Viacom’s stocks were worth more than each Time Warner, Disney, and News Corps alone (par. 6). Here one witnesses the growth of a far reaching multinational conglomerate. MTV, Nickelodeon, Nick at Night and VH1 are all channels that have programming for young adults and/or children. Nickelodeon in particular is a channel that has always claimed to represent the interests of the young. According to the Nick website:

When Nickelodeon first launched on April Fools Day, 1979, our goal was to give kids a place on television just for them. We began as the kids' programming block of the Qube Network and we were available to just 600,000 subscribers in Columbus, Ohio. The first programs we aired were Video Comic Books—cartoons from around the
world, 'Nickel Flicks,' and 'Pinwheel', a show hosted by a
human with a bevy of puppets. (Nick)

Nick was started in order to create a place specifically for kids, much in the same
way that media literacy websites attempt to create a unique environment for the young
people they are trying to teach. Prior to even the launch of Nickelodeon, in 1977 a pay-
per-view like channel was established by Warner-Amex out of Columbus, Ohio which
became the inspiration for the much larger television channel to come. nickelodeon was
first named the Pinwheel network after its first and only show (called Pinwheel). In 1981
the name was changed to Nickelodeon and the channel was broadcasted all across the
United States. Interestingly, there were no commercials during the first few years (Brown
1). Because of this, many of the shows aired on Nick were from other countries and/or
very low budget. However, in 1984, Nick added commercials and was able to create its
own programming of much higher quality (Smith 1). Already we see the growth of
consumerism with the origins of a television channel just for “kids.” In creating
entertainment for children, Nickelodeon simultaneously trains them to become capitalists.
Nickelodeon is now a powerhouse owned by Viacom which gets its message out to over
2 million viewers (Gorman). There is a moral dilemma in the ways in which
entertainment is presented to young people. Should it be free of all ideas of consumption?
Does it have a duty to teach as well as entertain? These are important questions to keep in
mind while examining the merits of media literacy education.

Nick.com has very little documentation of its history on the internet and even
lacks an ‘about us’ page, but this really does not make it that uncommon. Many websites
do not document their own history or their many incarnations. However, with the help of
the “Wayback Machine,” which is a meta-crawler that periodically takes snap shots of websites; we can create a better picture of the progression of Nick.com. Originating in 1996, Nick.com started as a very simple website with few pictures and even fewer links. The site was used to promote upcoming television shows, but there was little room for audience interaction or creativity. The website has come a long way from its humble origins and we will explore the layout of the website in tandem with PBS later in this piece. Importantly, we must keep in mind the far reaching power of a media conglomerate like Viacom. With Nickelodeon as only one of its many assets, Viacom has the power to reach millions and millions of people. Without wanting to sound too pessimistic by using Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, they are using in how they pointedly argued that we were being distracted the Culture Industry in the mid 20th century. In their view, media is a form of distraction that uses pseudo-individualization and standardization to maintain the status quo. We the public were meant to consume these messages and forget all of our troubles. In a Marxist sense, we were persuaded into not banning together as the proletariat to create a classless society. I argue that this is a bit of an overstatement and that we are not necessarily the cultural dupes that they had assumed, but there is some truth to what they say. One has to be conscious of the power of media and the fact that even if we are able to decode messages and meanings differently, a more powerful message is harder for us to not notice. The point of a media literacy project is to address some of these issues by giving young people the tools of critical analysis. Corporations like Viacom also want to give young people tools, but they aspire to teach them how to consume more. I wouldn’t say that companies want people to
not think, but that they try to convince them that Nick has what they need, whether it be as entertainment or goods. The website for Nick is obviously going to be used more than Don’t Buy It, which in turn gives it much more cultural power and influence. Therefore, we must now examine the production of Don’t Buy It in order to compare the significance of both these sites.

Public Broadcasting Service’s history began in 1969 as a private, nonprofit organization (PBS par. 1). Often when talking about public television, the British Broadcasting Company is first to come up, but due to limits of space I will focus solely on the American version. In 1927, the Radio Act was supposed to force commercial communication companies to operate in the ‘public interest’ (par. 3); however, most of these organizations were more interested in profits than educational entertainment. The Communications Act of 1934 further alienated public broadcasting by advising Congress to not pass any legislation that would allot time for non-profit organizations on radio (par. 4). In 1945, Congress created a license for non-commercial education radio stations, but there was not enough funding to make it a viable option. Finally with the signing of the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967, it would eventually lead to the creation of PBS in 1969. Since that time, there has been much controversy over the usefulness of publicly financed television stations, especially during the deregulation era of the 70's and 80's (Avery 1). With the United States in the midst of a recession, the future state of PBS is unknown.

The history of Don't Buy It is a bit more difficult to track down. According to “The Way Back Machine,” the domain name was purchased in 1996, but the website itself was not posted until sometime in 2002. On the website itself, it says that it was produced in Seattle by KCTS Television (a local PBS station) and POP! Multimedia, a
marketing firm that creates designs for websites. According to the website, Don't Buy It had a large team of roughly fifty people, even including several children, who originally created the space. It would have been very interesting if they had more specifically explained the role of the children on the site development, but unfortunately the background information is bare bones at best. While the Nick site does not have a credits page, one would assume that many more people were involved in the creation and continued maintenance of the site. The Nick site is continuously updating while Don't Buy It's content stays stagnant. According to Don't Buy It, “Money to create Don't Buy It: Get Media Smart is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Don't Buy It: Get Media Smart is one of five sites created for youth with funds from CPB.” So, the website is obviously publicly funded and does not have the same resources as the powerful Nickelodeon. Also, it seems that Don't Buy It has not been updated since 2004 (Waybackmachine), which for a media literacy website really dates the content. The main content of the site has changed slightly over the years, but the format of the site has stayed the same.

Don't Buy It's main mission statement proclaims that by “Using games and advertising parodies Don't Buy It challenges young people to think critically about the media.” Also, the site states that: “Don't Buy It: Get Media Smart is a media literacy Web site for young people that encourages users to think critically about media and become smart consumers. Activities on the site are designed to provide users with some of the skills and knowledge needed to question, analyze, interpret and evaluate media messages.” “Don't Buy It” takes an interesting approach to media literacy by focusing on consumption. I think that this method kills several birds with one stone. First, children are
so inundated by entertainment that attempts to incorporate them into a capitalistic system; they need a fun way of learning about the different methods corporations use to sell products and lifestyles. Secondly, parents would be happy that their children were using an educational website that teaches them about informed buying. Lastly, the website can be used by educators in the classroom when the teacher needs extra material. Unfortunately, it seems that the site does not work with national media literacy standards, but it still can be used to address some of the same issues.

I would like to restate my preferred definition of media literacy prior to presenting my close reading of these websites. My preferred definition of media literacy was created by the Center for Media Literacy and states that:

Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy. (Center for Media Literacy).

Again, I find it interesting that while Don't Buy It gives young people the tools to read media, Nick gives kids the tools to consume media and to appreciate a certain kid-only form of consumption.

Nick is a website developed for young kids. I grew up watching Nickelodeon, but by the time my family had the Internet, I was already too old to appreciate the website. When I was a child in the mid to late 1990's, Nickelodeon's motto was “Kids Rule!” which was how they framed childhood, that kids should be empowered. Nick was split
into several different age brackets, first the mornings had content for younger children, the afternoon and night would have “normal” Nickelodeon programming, on the weekends Snick (Saturday Night Nick) for older kids, and Nick at Night at night. Since then, according to the website, there is now Nick Jr (for younger children aged 1-5 which has spawned into its own 24 hour channel called Noggin). In terms of agency and empowerment, I distinctly remember the channel continuously depicting adults as bumbling fools who just couldn't relate to or understand child culture. Currently, the website still focuses on youth culture, but also considers itself “child and family” entertainment. While there is no “about us” page, Nick has a legal page that has some very interesting phrasing.

This is the legal part of the show. It's just so everybody
knows the rules for Nickelodeon on the Web. Be sure to get your parents to review and discuss these rules with you:

Interestingly, Nick has this legal page with a section written in “kid talk.” One wonders how many children, as opposed to adults; actually do click on this page and how effective it is in conveying the legal ramifications of the site content. Nickelodeon attempts to try to get kids to include their parents in the process, but again, how effective is it? This question is especially important when applied to other parts of the site where kids are encouraged to purchase items, but at the same time are asked to talk to their parents first.

All the toys and games here are just for you to play with.
You can't sell them, give them to anyone, or pretend you made them. You can't do anything EXCEPT play with
them, unless you ask us first and we say it's OK. Kind of like playing with your big sister's toys, right?

We can decode legal language within this simplistic framework. Children cannot try to make profit from anything on the website or they will have Nick’s lawyers on top of them! Accordingly, the first section of the legal document has to do with site use. In this day and age, it is very important to discuss legal issues of intellectual property rights, especially with young children. Nickelodeon, like many other corporations, is very concerned with the theft of its material. However, it is interesting that in later parts of this document, Nick is more than willing to take anything that kids post on their site as their own property. So the power again is in the hands of the big corporation. Rather than emphasize a kind of creative poaching in which children are allowed to use material to make their own games and fun, Nickelodeon claims a strict policy. One wonders how much more attached audiences would be to entertainment on Nick if they were encouraged to take material and make new items out of it. In the language of this document, it is interesting that they make an analogy to playing with one's “big sister’s toys.” One needs permission prior to using someone else's stuff. Although in this language, we almost forget that Nick is unlike our big sisters because while our sister might punch us in the face, she wouldn’t have us sent to court to pay millions of dollars in penalties.

If you see something you don't like, remember that all the stuff on the message boards, chat rooms and "Write to Nick" comes straight from other kids, not from someone at nick.com. Nick.com wouldn't tell kids what to say, because
kids have minds of their own! But if someone sends ugly messages, we'll do our best to take care of it. We all want nick.com to be a good, clean place to hang out.

There are a couple of different meanings that can be derived from this message. Firstly, Nick claims that it would never censor what a child says. The site has no control over what people say on the message boards. But, in the next breath, they state that they will pull down “ugly” messages as quickly as they can to create a “clean place to hang out.” So, while they value the agency of children and believe that children should be able to say whatever they want, at the same time there is censorship on the site. Unfortunately, the site is not any more explicit than this. What is it that keeps a website message forum clean? What words or phrases are appropriate and which ones are not? Nick teaches kid to have free will and free minds only as far as it fits under a certain moral paradigm.

If you write something that catches our eye in "Write to Nick," on a message board or in a chat room, we might want to use it on the site. By sending in your thoughts and hanging out in the chat rooms, and getting your parent’s permission to do so, you and your parents are telling us it's ok to repeat what you say. It's even ok to put it in an advertisement. It means we can use it in any way we want, anywhere, until the end of time. And wouldn't it be cool if we used something YOU said until the end of time?
This paragraph is most significant to the ways in which Nick.com is framed as a cool and hip site. The above paragraph informs users that any of their thoughts or ideas posted on the website are owned by Nick. However, at the end of the statement they qualify it by stating that it is “cool” to allow Nick to use something “YOU” said until the end of time. To many the ownership of one's own words is very significant, but to a naive young person, perhaps this seems like a good idea. When I read this section, I become worried about the future of intellectual property rights because of the way it is worded. Why would it be cool for someone to own your thoughts and ideas for the rest of time? Why will Nick not allow anyone to touch their intellectual property but will take everyone else’s? This is not to say that Nick is any different from any other website, but putting it into this type of language is very troubling.

Nick.com is a website built to be user friendly. It is easy to navigate from page to page due to the many links along the top border and the left side column. Along the top are links to many of Nick's signature television shows, movies, and award ceremonies. Interestingly, in the middle of all of these links is a link to “Big Green Help,” which is Nick's initiative to teach children about green ways of living (which is ironic because Nick is a 24-hour television channel that, in order to make money, needs to be consumed by these children). Each of the links has sub-links that go to either videos or games. The site has many different games to play, which creates a very interactive and dynamic space. One can come back over and over again and have different games to play or videos of shows to watch. In my observations, many of the games are very similar to famous games like Guitar Hero, or simple flash games, but many websites borrow these
animations from each other. **Nick** does have special games specific to each show which further connects the user to the “**Nick**” experience.

While there are advertisements all over the **Nick** website, they all are marked with a distinctive “Ad” symbol. So, links to the **Nick** shop are accompanied by simple “Ad”s above them. The center of the website, just below the top row of links, is a constantly changing banner with ads for shows, games, and other aspects of the **Nick** world. Each ad has the “Ad” symbol which tells the audience members that **Nick** is indeed trying to sell something. I do have to commend the site for being transparent in terms of its own financial gains, but it still seems a bit fishy when the link to “Neopets”, a digital pet store, does not have this symbol. There is not any information on the site about why only **Nick** ads are marked.

The “Online Safety Guide” section is another learning area for kids. There are ten different rules for kids to explore. Each rule is colored brightly and has an accompanying picture. The rules are as follows: “Never give out personal information online; Don't use your real name in your screen name; Keep your password to yourself; read the rules and privacy options for websites; Only share stuff online that you don't mind anyone seeing; Once you post something online, it stays online; If you're a kid, keep your photos offline; Don't download anything if you don't know who it is from; Keep your online friendships online; If you feel unsafe, tell an adult.” These are all progressive suggestions and one would hope than many children who use this site are encouraged to look at this list. However, I argue that these concerns are more for the parents than the children. The only way that this would be effective would be if someone directed them to these rules. As it stands now, the link is at the very bottom of the site and is in no way highlighted. One
would think that if Nick was really interested in the safety of children on the Internet they would make it a requirement that all users must read the rules prior to being able to use the site. Again, this appeases parents and is useful to educators, but the reality is that most children will not be reading the safety guide.

On the other side of the spectrum, PBS's Don't Buy It is a website dedicated to teaching children about reading and understanding media. Don't Buy It is laid out much more simply than the Nick site. Along the top of the site is a list of only five links that lays out the majority of the site. The links are: “Advertising Tricks, Buying Smart, Your Entertainment, What Can you Do, and Free Stuff.” Each section has another page of information that leads to interactive activities. One such activity is called “Question the Commercial.” Under this heading are several useful questions to ask one's self after watching a television commercial. They tell the audience to watch commercials for their music, what the actors look like, and how the products are presented. One wonders why they did not take the actor’s section further and talk about race, class, and gender. Perhaps the site authors felt that the audience of the site would be too young to be able to grasp these social concerns. Most of the rest of the home page is taken up by three large boxes, two of which change every time the page is refreshed. The first two have pictures and descriptions of activities such as “Meet Local Teen Heroes,” “Be an Ad Detective,” “Get Involved,” and “Is the Price Right?” The unchanging box is an online survey which now asks “when is someone old enough to watch a horror movie on television?” About 30,000 people have answered thus far. With that many responses, one gets the feeling that the question has not changed in quite awhile.
Don't Buy It seems to emphasize the importance of being able to interpret the different meanings from consumer goods that you are about to purchase, but it doesn't promote an anti-consumeristic lifestyle. A significant portion of the site is called “What's in that Shopping Bag?” Each page has an advertisement and a question. An example is of a G.I. Joe print ad with an action figure and a giant missile launcher shooting a rocket. The multiple choice question next to the ad asks the user what the ad is actually trying to sell. The answer is that only the missile launcher comes inside the box when you purchase this product. The same section shows a close-up of the box which clearly states that not only are the action figures sold separately, but also that the toy doesn't actually shoot missiles! While this is all good and informative, it really only teaches children to be wary of what they consume and doesn't give an alternative to the lifestyle that many Americans are accustomed to. The site does little to open children's eyes to the physical production of goods or to the globalized exploitation of underage workers.

Understandably, they are first and foremost interested in getting kids to think about how they consume, but part of that should be the way in which their consumption affects the rest of the world.

Don’t Buy It does promote grassroots activism. Under the heading “What You Can Do” is a list of mailing addresses for toy companies, toy stores, television networks, and government agencies with encouragement to write in and express your opinions. Considering how rudimentary the site itself is, this call to action feels misplaced. Although I was impressed, it’s incongruent with the age and manner Don’t Buy It adopted for the site. Additionally, there are stickers kids can print out on label paper with instructions that read: “if you see an ad you don't agree with, put a Don't Buy It sticker
on it. Tell the world what you think and spread the word about Don't Buy It at the same time!” The repercussions of potential defacement and youth protest are never discussed, nor does it advise telling your parents or having a conversation with anyone. This is well meaning, but ends at the sticker.

Conclusion

In conducting a close analysis of both Nick and Don't Buy It, I argue that in order for a website for young people to function and be educational it needs to maintain relevant content, be interactive, and be transparent (in terms of what the producers of the site intend to do with the information collected there). Firstly, our media literacy website must be kept up to date. In order for an educational website to maintain significance, one cannot just simply build a site and let it stand for itself. There needs to be a team of producers who are constantly changing and updating information. Much in the same way that Nick is maintained, a media literacy website cannot simply be created and left to survive on its own. People's interests change and media is constantly updating itself and therefore there needs to be the same sort of rigor for our future website.

Secondly, interactivity is the only way to keep the attention of today's students. In order for a website to succeed, it can't have just text. Many websites fail because they only present material without allowing users to interact. Even Wikipedia allows users to change information and therefore allows them to feel like they are a part of a community. The lesson to be learned from both Nick and Don't Buy It is that the more students are allowed to feel like they have goals to accomplish on websites, the more they will back. Both sites have games and interactive sections, although Nick is much more extensive,
with videos and music, and ideally would be more along the lines of what our website would eventually become.

Lastly, websites must be transparent as well as open about the material they collect from the audience. While Nick does have a section that explains copyright issues to young people, it still claims that it owns any sort of content that an individual adds to the site. A media literacy website must be run copyright free in order for students to feel comfortable using it and to be progressive. We want our information to be disseminated to as many people as possible, and therefore we should allow it to be used by as many people that want to participate. Our website will not own the content that we create and it will not copyright the content that users may add in the future. Education should be a free pursuit, and therefore we need to create a learning space where people feel comfortable to give us ideas without expecting us to steal them. This is a very controversial subject, but I believe that a website should be able to use user content, but not own it.

Throughout this paper, I have examined the privately funded website Nick.com and a non-profit one, Don't Buy It, in order to better understand how to create an effective media literacy website. Firstly, one must maintain some semblance of current content in order to stay relevant as well as keep young people interested in coming back. Secondly, more cultural studies theory and exercises are necessary to make it more challenging for an older audience. Thirdly, the more interactive the site, the more people will be interested in repeat uses. Fourthly, a site needs to be extremely transparent in order to gain the trust of its users. Overall, I argue that there needs to be a significant increase in the number of educational websites that give young adults the tools to be able to critically understand their media.
Chapter 3- EMERALD LENS: A MEDIA LITERACY WEBSITE

Website Content: Note – all links will be embedded in the text on the website

Brief Introduction to the technical aspects of this section: The following section deals with the portion of the website for which I was responsible (content). The overall framework of the website, the site map (including the basic layout), and a glossary comprise the rest of this section. While the site map may be viewed as consisting of linear lessons, the final site will allow users to jump from lesson to lesson. Also, any words used from the glossary within the text of each section will be hyper-linked to the glossary definition.

Website project

Mission Statement: Media literacy is an often overlooked component of education in young peoples’ lives. Contributors to the Emerald Lens have noticed a lack of critical thinking skills in many young people coming to college. Our objective is to create a space in which media literacy is introduced to a high school aged audience in a creative and entertaining way while maintaining a high level of critical thinking. In order to be relevant to modern classrooms we have attempted to work with No Child Left Behind guidelines to fulfill much needed content for the critical thinking components of state mandated educational benchmarks. Importantly, Emerald Lens believes that educators can better connect with their students through popular culture. The majority of the site
uses contemporary examples and encourages young people to use examples from their own lives in order to teach in a way that maintains relevance.

**Introduction and Methods**

The Emerald Lens is a website dedicated toward creating a media literate group of young people, specifically high school students. Katie Barak and myself decided on the name Emerald Lens because of its use in the *Wizard of Oz*. The people who lived in the Emerald city viewed the world through glasses that were tinted green. I think the easiest way to describe paradigms to young people is by using this analogy of tinted glasses. We all understand our surroundings because of our frameworks of knowledge and to better comprehend the people around us, we must be willing to examine the world through alternative glasses.

Essentially, we thought that the best way to create a media literacy website would be by examining different mediums and their impact on users. The overarching goal is to create a space that students could use on their own, for it to be entertaining and yet educational, and also incorporate higher level cultural studies thought. In attempting this, we used a similar format from our Introduction to Popular Culture classes at BGSU in order to use popular culture and at the same time introduce these young people to cultural theory. To do this we came up with certain themes or areas of interests that we saw in each medium. The categories we came up with are audience, product placement, outlaw/official hero and heroic monomyth, and theories which include Marx, feminism and race. Rather than bombard high school students with primary sources, in order to simplify these dense ideas we instead re-interpreted some of the categories and theories to make them more accessible.
In order to be relevant, the website uses Ohio state educational benchmarks (because we reside in Ohio) as a theoretical background. While my partner focuses on those aspects in her thesis, I instead have used media literacy theory to help inform the website. While medium theory was not helpful at all, in the sense that it gave too much emphasis to newer technologies, it was still helpful in terms of organizing a website. In separating a website by medium, we can begin to create an organized website that flows from point to point. The initial issue was simply how to organize these issues that obviously having a great deal of overlap. Medium theory was useful in that it helped us to think about categorizing on the Internet. Secondly, the work of Julie Frechette's has helped us to ground ourselves in cultural studies theory that is relevant to the site.

The following sections are my contribution to the website, namely the content for the audience and new media portions. The other sections content can be found in Katie Barak's thesis. Also, we felt that there should be application sections where students could use all of this new found information and apply it to something they see in popular culture or in their real lives. So, at the end of each section there is a short exercise for students to conduct. The goal being that students will see that these ideas do in fact affect their everyday lives and are meaningful texts.

Main Content

The following section is the main content for the site. I have written two sections, Audience and New Media and Katie Barak will have the other sections in her piece. The point is to introduce users to different aspects of media literacy through different mediums. Therefore, each section will have blurbs written in order to introduce students
to the new material. After each of these sections, overarching questions will be asked in order to add a more practical level to the site.

New Media/Internet

The term new media can be understood in many different ways. More often than not, it refers to the Internet, but many different technologies such as mp3 players, cell phones, and PDA’s can also fit into this category. Simply put, new media defines any advancement in technology that affects our everyday lives. The study of new media is very important because these new gadgets are becoming more and more important to our individual lives. For example, if you were to lose your cell phone, would you be able to remember the phone numbers programmed on it? Often these technologies are so taken for granted that we no longer think about how they change the way we interact with the world. In particular, the Internet has changed the way that we communicate. With social networking sites like Facebook and Myspace and instant messaging programs like AOL Instant Messenger, it is possible to instantly connect with someone across the world.

When talking about new media, it is important to keep in mind that many of the changes in the way we use technology also are affected by culture. This new access to information has opened a whole new way of understanding the globe; our understanding of geography has changed. Now, one can instantly view live video of the Egyptian pyramids. One can travel to faraway lands and still be connected to his/her loved ones through free online digital software such as Skype (a video chat service). One can be friends with someone in China without ever stepping foot in Asia. Although it is important to realize all the benefits of this rapidly expanding technology, we must also
consider the ways in which we are limited by it. Many articles have been written about the dangers of excessive Internet use, Internet addiction, and young people no longer interacting together face to face.

**Audience**

Audience is very interesting when studying new media because some people tend to assume that most people, at least in the United States, have access to these new technologies. Unfortunately, the digital divide—the gap between those who have access and those who don’t—is still a cause for concern. There are still many who are without direct access to the Internet. However, audiences for some technologies are growing. For example, advertisers for video game systems like the Nintendo Wii are targeting older women in order to open up what is typically a male dominated field to different audiences. An interesting question to consider is who is not on the Internet? Who still does not have access to these growing technologies? Why do we assume that everyone in the world is on the Internet? Think about people who cannot afford a computer or access to the Internet, whether it is in the United States or elsewhere in the world. If the Internet is so powerful, then what does it say about these people who cannot access it?

**Product Placement**

Product placement is present in all forms of technology. From cell phone applications to video games, advertisements are everywhere! Every time you log onto Facebook, there are subtle ads on side banners; e-mails sent from Yahoo accounts are often followed by ads after the signature; and when you play video games, there are ads for real products! Another annoyance is the use of pop-up ads, which have created an
entire industry around programs designed to block them from ever getting to your computer. Online search engines, like Google, are built so that certain products or websites come up more than others. Many websites profit from covering themselves in ads, much in the same way that magazines and newspapers have for years. Most important, however, is the way that some of these ads have been woven into the very fabric of these online worlds. Most people now consider banners at the top and sides of websites to be normal. In fact, the ever changing Internet does not have archives. When something changes, records are rarely kept to discuss the history of the Internet. Rather, there is a constant feeling of normalcy, meaning that this is the way it is and always has been. One must consider whether these products are really effecting consumption and if they are changing online experiences.

**Outlaw Hero/Official Hero**

On the Internet, it is possible to become a heroic figure very quickly. Due to websites like Youtube, one can become an instant celebrity. People like the Angry Video Game Nerd ([http://www.youtube.com/user/JamesNintendoNerd](http://www.youtube.com/user/JamesNintendoNerd)) have a cult following because they use this new form of communication to get their voice out to many people. He has close to 4 million hits on just one video alone! In effect, they become Internet heroes without having to deal with the normal media channels. Soulja Boy, for example, used the Internet to become popular and attract traditional media sources to gain record deals and even more fans. In a sense, these celebrities become individuals whom we look up to because they have achieved the American Dream. One can study the way they use the Internet to get their voice heard and, once famous, what they do with that platform.
Theory

Marxist theorists are useful in studying the underlying ideologies on the Internet. Ideas like the culture industry, created by the Frankfurt school, can be useful when studying the ways in which the Internet has become standardized. Many websites not only are very similar, but also allow for little user creativity. Facebook, for example, has the same layout throughout, so even though one can “individualize” his/her page it still looks the same as all the others. The reasons for this may be to make transitions between different pages easier on the eyes, but it also severely limits the ways in which users can be creative on the Internet. The concept of hegemony and the Internet is also interesting because one notices how dominant ideologies (or ideas) are further reinforced. For example, the Dove Campaign for Real Women (http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/) claims to subvert the popular idea of beauty, but at the same time the website for Axe products (http://www.theaxeeffect.com/), which is also owned by Unilever, promotes extremely sexist, old fashioned depictions of women. So, while one site attempts to break traditionally sexist views of women, another site owned by the same company hegemonically portrays women as sex objects of men. Importantly, one must understand the Internet as not being a place where culture is radically different from everyday life.

Examining race and the Internet is interesting because there is so much room for voices that are not traditionally heard. While many mainstream websites perpetuate dominant views of beauty in terms of race, there are many other places where diversity is celebrated. When examining the Internet, we must be aware of the all sites' popularity and usage, but at the same time we must look at alternative sources. Hybrid spaces are
also significant because there is the possibility of breaking down racial binaries through websites that talk about these complex issues. For example, a website called Mixed Folks (http://www.mixedfolks.com/rights.htm) describes the rights that should be given to those who are of mixed backgrounds. When studying race on the Internet, one must both examine sites of dominant racial hierarchies (i.e. What races are depicted the most? Who gets the most attention in news stories? Who is missing? Etc.) and the sites of grassroots movements that challenge racial biases.

Feminist theory can be used for Internet studies in many different ways. In particular, examining the male gaze and the ways in which women are used in advertisements is significant to any study of portrayals of women. For example, the Axe Effect (http://www.theaxeeffect.com/) is a website which shows women as simply sexual objects for men to consume. By using Axe products, men become irresistible to beautiful women who will do anything to get with them, including beating up other women who get in their way. In these ads, the women are simply sexual place holders who are there for the men to look at and believe that they can consummate their love with. Obviously this is an extreme instance, but online ads often use female bodies to promote products. Both masculinity and femininity are highly exaggerated on the Internet. Many first person video and computer games depict men as hyper-violent and sexist. One must keep in mind that there is a spectrum of ways in which sexuality and gender can be performed, and it can be useful to study these popular depictions on the Internet.

Application/Exercises
Find two websites, one official, the other a fan made site for a favorite band, television show, or really anything of interest. Examine both websites closely to determine the messages that are being produced. For example, you might pick Britney Spears as your main text and a fan site to compare. Some questions that you may ask are: What are the main themes on both websites (in terms of pictures, text, and layout)? Who is the audience? Who produced these websites? What cultural assumptions are present on these websites (which will help you with your thesis)? How popular are these sites? How often are they updated? How much, if at all, do these sites impact each other?

Lesson: Often fan websites deal with much more controversial subjects than official ones and often will focus on topics that the official would never address. Also, this can be an easy way to introduce students to media bias.

Advertising

From the moment we are born, we are inundated by advertisements in all forms. Most media are funded through advertisements that are prevalent everywhere. Interestingly, this form of persuasion has come a long way. Historically, advertising through billboards and signs for local stores goes as far back as ancient Egypt and Rome (Bhatia 4). With the invention of print media, advertising moved into the realm of print ads that could be sent all over the country. The creation of television again changed the field by making it possible to show moving images of the goods or services being produced. Now with the Internet, there is a whole new way to grab the attention of consumers. Crucially, one must understand that as these technologies progressed, the audience became more sophisticated and needed more alternative stimuli to really pay
attention. Simultaneously, there were more and more advertisements being created. Currently, according to a Nielsen Report, we witness over 1,600 advertisements a day (http://www.emayzine.com/infoage/lectures/Culture_of_Real_Virtuality.htm). Many advertisers call this “clutter.” One effective way of making it through the “clutter” is to use emotions in ads (Marconi 86). If people feel emotionally connected to an object, they are more likely to consume it.

**Audience**

The advertising audience is basically anyone that can consume a text. However, an individual must understand how to read a text before it can be effective for the producer. Often this is not as hard as it appears. Producers of these types of texts are very effective in that they can construct an image, commercial, or internet ad that hints at the desires of the people of the time. When studying the audience of advertisements, it is important to examine who the ad is being targeted to because there are many different groups of people in the world who have different desires and interests. What stereotypes are being used to promote an ad? Advertising can reflect what is happening socially during a time period because it represents many problematic images of certain groups or individuals.

**Product Placement**

Is a technique used by advertisers to casually place their good or message into a text that is not necessarily a typically advertisement. Most often, one can see this happening in a television show or movie. Whenever a product's brand name is visible in a
scene, it is most likely a tactic of product placement. In current media, it becomes harder and harder to distinguish when product placement is occurring. Shows on MTV like *My Super Sweet 16* showcase vehicles that young teenagers want for their 16th birthdays. In talking about the car, the young person is essentially advertising the product and the brand name. Also, films like the James Bond series have often been used as glorified car commercials. Recently, many commercials will use scenes directly from the a in order to sell a product. Pay attention to any car commercial that showcases an actor from a car related film. This advertising is very subtle, so it is important to pay attention to how this technique is being used to 'trick' us into thinking that it is flawlessly a part of a film.

Another example would be whenever a main character decides to drink something and the brand of the soda, alcohol or coffee is clearly visible. The next time you take a drink from your soda can, see if you hold the label out to an invisible audience. This is a very awkward thing to do and therefore something easy to watch for when you view your next film!

**Celebrity (excluding heroic monomyth from this section)**

One can examine many of the characters that use advertisers to sell goods. We argue that often audience members want to romanticize the characters they see on television simply because they are so visible. For instance, Vince Offer has become a quasi-celebrity through his recent Shamwow commercials. There are literally dozens of websites devoted to discussions with people who are infatuated with him and his accent. Communication technologies have helped to create spaces where we can see the same ads with the same characters over and over again. Many audiences either vilify or glorify
these characters because they become as prominent as some of the actors on normal television. Perhaps the Shamwow guy will be able to use this fame to propel his acting career into the future!

**Theory**

**Marx**

Advertising is the mechanism which allows capitalist societies to function. Without advertising, one could not spread the word about their goods to large numbers of people. Accordingly, advertising tends to use stereotypes to get messages across because these artifacts are so quickly presented and understood. Hegemonic ideologies tend to be most prevalent in advertisements simply because there is such little time to present an idea that they tend to rely on what people are already aware of. Often these ads will use emotional messages to move past the “clutter”. Stereotypes of gender, race, and class are most easily examined in advertisements because they are so blatant.

**Race**

One way race can be examined in advertising is by simply asking who is not in certain ads. While minorities are more and more prevalent in modern commercials, Caucasian males still heavily dominate. When examining different advertisements, one must also be sure to note the roles of the different actors. What roles are given primarily to whites versus minorities? One must not fall into the argument that racial issues are no longer prevalent. Remember that stereotypes are most often found in advertisements, so be wary while analyzing for race.

**Gender**
The male gaze is often used in modern commercials. For instance, new Dawn Dish Detergent ads depict women who moisturize their hands with its alternative formula. The reasoning is that beautiful women must keep up their appearance while constantly washing the dishes. So, while the viewer gets to stare at these women, at the same time dominant gendered stereotypes are reinforced. Women are “supposed” to be the ones that clean up after their families and at the same time must maintain their beauty. An often familiar scene is of women who are perpetually in the kitchen. Cleaning product advertisements have used this stereotype for many years. One may ask why women are normally the ones shown cleaning. Why is there a heavy emphasis on beauty and products that will maintain one's beauty during cleaning? Where are the men in these ads?

**APPLICATION / EXERCISES**

For audience understanding provide a link to a very artistic, unusual short piece of film – Watch with a friend, then write down answers to these questions: What do you think the meaning is? Who would this appeal to (age, class, ethnicity, artistic people, everyone)? Do you like this film? Why or why not? Trade with someone else in the class and compare results. Did you both take the same meaning from the film? What was the same and different?

LESSON - not everyone decodes things in the same way. This is significant because it helps students understand that audiences will read texts differently from each other.

**Overarching Questions**
The following section consists of the possible overarching questions for the website. These questions will fall in each media section. So, there will first be an introduction to each section (which I have covered above), with these questions being the application of the ideas discussed. Katie Barak and I came up with the basic questions, although they may be slightly different in the actual website. I have taken the initial content and have filled in the gaps in information and background. These questions will be used for each medium and will be the main questions of the site (meaning that they will be directly placed on the site). From here, further development will be needed to make them more specific to each section. One of the main challenges in coming up with this list of questions was making them broad enough to fit each section. However, as the letters represent, we have tried to make questions for each section. Importantly, these issues will make up the majority of the website. The purpose of these questions is to give students the ability to think about media in a new way, but also allow them to be able to go out and analyze media for themselves.
### Website Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METHODS</th>
<th>Television A</th>
<th>Film B</th>
<th>New Media / Internet C</th>
<th>Advertising D</th>
<th>Music E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audience 1</td>
<td>A1</td>
<td>B1</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>D1</td>
<td>E1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Placement 2</td>
<td>A2</td>
<td>B2</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>D2</td>
<td>E2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outlaw Hero/Heroic Monomyth 3</td>
<td>A3</td>
<td>B3</td>
<td>C3</td>
<td>D3</td>
<td>E3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories 4</td>
<td>A4i</td>
<td>B4i</td>
<td>C4i</td>
<td>D4i</td>
<td>E4i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i = Marx</td>
<td>A4ii</td>
<td>B4ii</td>
<td>C4ii</td>
<td>D4ii</td>
<td>E4ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii = Feminist</td>
<td>A3iii</td>
<td>B4iii</td>
<td>C4iii</td>
<td>D4iii</td>
<td>E4iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii = Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application 5</td>
<td>A5</td>
<td>B5</td>
<td>C5</td>
<td>D5</td>
<td>E5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1** – Shows the basic structure of the website. We have ordered each section by medium and then by different paradigms down the left side. Created by Sean Watkins and Katie Barak.
Figure 2 – depicts the flow of the website. Each section will have text and images to reflect the current topic. One will be able to start a section and then work their way to applications. Ideally, the site will be nonlinear in that one can simply go to a section that appears to be more interesting to them.
Overarching Questions

(Many overlap because it was very difficult trying to break these issues up into different section when they are all so interconnected) The letters and numbers reflect the section in which the questions will appear. See figures 1 and 2 for further information.

The following questions, A1-E1, are all questions that are applicable to the different mediums that we examine on the site. So A1 would start with television, B1 with Internet and so on. Therefore, we start with the audience section of each medium and have created lists of questions. The main overhead question that we used to build more specific questions is who is this directed at? And how can you tell? These questions are very important to think about when looking at media because it can say a lot about how companies think about whom their audiences are and what they like to consume.

A1. What time is it on? What channel is it on (cable or basic, public access)?

Commercials – are the products for women? Children? Older people?

Wealthy people? Minorities?

B1. Ratings - who has decided age-appropriate? Which actors chosen to portray roles? What is the venue; are you at an independent theatre or a megaplex? (urban/rural bias for films)
C1. Who has access to the Internet (digital divide/generational gaps in technological know-how)? Is there an age restriction? Are there statistics available? Who knows the online audience? How can different websites target different people (age, gender, race, class, etc.)? What ads are there?

D1. Who is in the ads? Who produced the ads? What is the product? What is the venue?

E1. Genre – What is the categorization for different texts? How are things organized and why? What is the difference between CMT vs MTV?

**Product Placement (for A2, B2, C2, D2, E2)**

This second section deals with product placement. At this point, we decided that many of the questions overlap and that perhaps it would be better to create questions that are applicable to all sections. Product placement is important because it happens so often and is something that students will easily be able to see in all the different mediums. Also, it gives students the skills to be able to think critically about media and shows that every media text is owned by a company that owns other products.

- What is the product?
- Where is it placed/who’s holding it/positive or negative connotations?
- Draw the distinction between a film or television show that features a product (ie a company paid to have it placed there), a song where the artist chose (or did they get paid?)
Outlaw hero / Heroic Monomyth

The following section deals with the heroic monomyth. Some media are easier to talk about than others when it comes to this section. Particularly the new media section is challenging to think about in these terms, but we attempt to create relevant questions to be consistent. In the future, we may change this section into an analysis of celebrity.

A3 – B3 – D3 – E3

▪️ Who are you “supposed” to root for (start explaining binary oppositions)? Why?
▪️ Is there a middle ground or is it two extremes?
▪️ Does the hero have a “questionable” past, hobbies, etc., signifying he’s not all good?
▪️ Discuss constructed persona. How do musicians / celebrities use their reputation? What does it bring to the films, music or shows? How does the ad utilize the idea of “outlaw” or “good guy” to give its product a personality?

C3

▪️ What are some issues surrounding “Free music”? What about the villainous Metallica? Research this issue and discuss with friends.
▪️ Bloggers – What are some famous bloggers? What controversies have they gotten themselves into? Examine Perez Hilton.

Theories
(which are used as guidelines rather than literal interpretations – perhaps in future version of the site there will be more in-depth discussion of these theories, but at the same time we do not want to frighten off our audience.)

i. Marxist

ii. Feminist

iii. Race

**Theories from Marx**

- **Class**
  - A4i – What is the importance of wealth? (check out Super Sweet 16 and representation of poor on television)
  - B4i – Representation and stereotypes are important to study. (ie. What is your film if you are poor? Many films are either depressing or a story that reinforcing traditional values. Look up examples of films that depict stereotypes and discuss how people are represented?)
  - C4i – How does the Digital divide affect the ways that identity is constructed on the Internet?
  - D4i – What is the products reputation based on how it’s shown – can tell who is being advertised to?
  - E4i – Similar to advertising, music (including music videos) is made to appeal to a certain class of people and you can use it to access a shared (but false) nostalgia. Find examples of this and ask yourself if this technique works.
The following are Marxist concepts that will be used in the content sections, and are used as frameworks for the entire site.

- **Hegemony** – What are some dominant messages in media (ways people are represented, how we are expected to think, etc)?

- **Ideology**- What ideologies are in media today?
  
  How has the idea of the nuclear family changed in recent years? Is it still the same? Why is this important?

**Theories from Feminism**

- **Gaze** – Where do we see the male gaze today and how does it represent women?

- **Gender as a performance** – How is gender performed in your text? What does this say about the roles of men? About women?

**Theories from Race**

- **Hybridity** – Are there texts with people of mixed origins (race and/or ethnicity) or are binaries used more often?

- **Binaries**- What are common racial binaries that are often in the text? Is there a race or ethnicity that is better treated? Why do you think that is?

**Glossary**

The following glossary will be a word bank of concepts that are used often throughout the site. Every time the word is used, it will be highlighted and hyperlinked to the glossary section. In the future, we would like to expand the definitions and possibly have more historical context.
Male Gaze – The point of view of the camera from the point of view of a heterosexual male

Performance - presenting gender specific behavior and affectations

Culture Industry - The culture industry is akin to a factory producing standardized cultural goods to manipulate the masses into passivity; the easy pleasures available through consumption of popular culture make people docile and content, no matter how difficult their economic circumstances.

Hegemony - Refers to the ability of dominant groups in society to exercise control over weaker groups not by means of force or domination, but by gaining their consent, so that the unequal distribution of power appears to be both legitimate and natural

Ideology- Defined as a set of beliefs, values, and ways of thinking through which human beings perceive and then explain what they assume to be reality.

Popular Culture – The study of everyday life and contemporary lifestyles and items that are well known and generally accepted, cultural patterns that are widespread within a population

Hybridity – The idea of one’s identity being constructed from many different backgrounds.

Hierarchies – When we mention hierarchies, we normally are speaking of power structures. One hierarchy would be the relationship between a person and his/her parent; normally the parent is “more” powerful than the child. In society, this is represented in racial, class, or gendered structures.

Grassroots Movements – Activist groups working in local communities to better society.
**Outlaw/Official Hero** - An outlaw hero is someone considered to be a celebrity within his/her own world, however he/she does not worry about following societal rules. An example would be Batman. On the other hand, an Official hero is someone who does good deeds by following all of the laws and codes of conduct like Superman.

**Text** - meaningful artifacts (or items) in culture that we use to analyze in popular culture.

A text can be a piece of clothing, a film, a book, or anything that one decides to examine.

**Paradigm** – A lens through which people understand the world. These are the frameworks of knowledge that we use in order to comprehend our daily lives. For example, people in Europe have different ways of looking at the world than people in the United States because of their backgrounds and upbringings. Simply, they understand the world differently because of the paradigms in which they live.

**Construction** – An idea that is created in a society. In cultural studies, we would argue that identities are socially constructed and not natural.

**Capitalism** - Capitalism is an economic system in which wealth, and the means of producing wealth, are privately owned and controlled rather than commonly, publicly, or state-owned and controlled.

**Conclusion**

The previous section consists of the main content of the website. Primarily, there will be sections that explain the medium and then the content areas (Audience, Product Placement, etc.) followed by questions about each section and further applications/exercises. I have tried to stay true to the theories from the first chapter of this thesis by introducing many ideas from cultural studies. The challenge was creating a
website that was accessible, but also challenging to students. We do not want to scare them away, so there is a fine balance between using these higher level ideas and making them accessible to a lot of people.

Unfortunately, we did not have time to create more interactive sections of videos and forums. This is due largely to our lack of technical expertise in these areas as well as legal issues with using videos on a website. Future research is needed in terms of copyright laws, education and the Internet. In order for the website to really be functional, it needs to have someone with the technical expertise to get it up there. Ideally, in the future, we would have a much bigger team in order to accomplish our lofty media literacy goals.

Our website is not online yet, and perhaps this is due to the scale of website, our over the top goals, our lack of technical skills, and lack of time. Both Katie and myself are Masters students in Popular Culture and have had a year of taking a comprehensive exam, writing this thesis, preparing a website and applying for PhD programs. We are not the best model to follow when trying to start a media literacy website simply because we could not dedicate our full time to the project. The lesson to be learned is that one must really put his/her entire time and effort into a project such as this in order to bring it to fruition.

While I believe that our goals and work so far have been a great step forward to media literacy on the Internet, we simply could not accomplish everything. The future will hopefully involve the uploading of our site to the Internet, and the implementation of it and examination of students who use the site. Further research is needed to perfect online media literacy.
Further Reading/Inspirations for this site

**Popular Culture: A User's Guide** by Susie O'Bien & Imre Szeman

**Introducing Cultural Studies**, Third Edition by Ziauddin Sardar

**Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks** (KeyWorks in Cultural Studies)
by Meenakshi Gigi Durham (Editor), Douglas Kellner (Editor)

**Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising** (Paperback)
by Judith Williamson
CONCLUSION

Media literacy should be a crucial component of young people's education. While “Emerald Lens” is not yet a functional website, the principles and theories in this thesis are stepping stones for future projects. In order to academically reach students we must be willing to use their personal interests. By using both media literacy and popular culture, we can accomplish this goal. Media literacy is a tool that needs to be further used by academics in all levels in order to encourage students to use critical thought for their everyday lives. Through theory and practical application, we will bring media literacy to the forefront of modern education.

In this thesis, I have examined many theories that have been useful for the “Emerald Lens.” Starting with McLuhan and Culkin, medium theory wasn't particularly useful, but helped us to organize the site and to understand the progression of media literacy in the United States. Julie Frechette, on the other hand, explained many of the crucial elements in media literacy that incorporate aspects of cultural studies and are incredibly useful in the creation of a media literacy website. Many of the questions for the website were created with her theories in mind. Also, the obstacles to media literacy that Silverblatt speaks about were very useful in trying to make the site less elitist. While we try to bring new ideas to younger students, we must keep in mind that everyone is affected by the media. If we are as transparent as we possibly can be, hopefully this will alleviate some of the inherent elitism in how people think and feel about the media.

Also, I conducted a close analysis of the websites Don't Buy It and Nick.com. The point was to gather ideas about how media literacy is being framed and to analyze
the positives and negatives for both sites. I found that educational and entertainment based websites need to be relevant, interactive and transparent in order to succeed. By relevant, I mean that the site must be updated frequently in order to keep the interest of the people using the site. Culture is constantly changing and therefore a website must change with it if people are to take the information seriously. A website must also be interactive in order to give some reason for users to regularly come back. Games, videos and forums are all aspects of a website that can connect users together and give them something entertaining to do during the visit. Lastly, transparency is needed to gain the trust of students who are using a site. The site must clearly state that everything they present is free and available for use. In this way, we can create a model that is different from typical media industry behavior. We are free and will not use your information for our own monetary gain; therefore you can feel safe during your experience at our site.

To restate my preferred definition for media literacy created by the Center for Media Literacy:

Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms – from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy. (Center for Media Literacy)

Media literacy can be used to give people the skills they need to have agency in a modern society. Critical thinking skills are lacking in many of the students I teach, and thus using media literacy as a paradigm in education would give young people a way to
think beyond what they are shown through the media. In a time period when we are in a major recession, it is important to give people skills that they will be able to use in their lives and future employment. Also, media literacy, with a focus in popular culture, can be used in many different fields to make them more entertaining and fun. Why can't education be enjoyable and at the same time give students agency? We as academics need to prepare our students for the power of the media industry, and “Emerald Lens” is a stepping stone toward this goal.

In creating a website there are many obstacles. This is especially so when one is in the humanities and trying to work on a joint project with a peer. One of the main issues we had during this process was dealing with the hesitation of our graduate college over conducting a joint thesis. I wrote very specific sections that do not overlap with my partner simply so that I can obtain credit for my Master's program. In order for students to work cooperatively, graduate schools in the humanities must take the lead of the sciences and allow more joint projects. Academia is supposedly about bringing ideas together in order to improve them or create something new, and yet we are hindered by artificial boundaries.

Another obstacle is the lack of technical expertise. While it is possible to create a website within minutes, it inherently is not going to be very good. Both Katie and I have had no training in web design and therefore were starting from scratch. With the limited amount of time we had to work on the project (less than a year) and with the other stresses of being full time Masters students, it was hard to find the time to self teach ourselves this new material. Also, while we have many friends in web design, not many of them want to work for free and couldn't be trusted to get work to us on time. For future
projects, I would recommend applying for grants in order to either get training or hire someone to build the site. Another issue is the amount of time we plan on working with the project. While we want to continue with media literacy in the future, there is nothing holding us to this project and therefore no stable base for the future. This type of project seems more fitted for a PhD level where one has much more time and can be more committed to the end results. Also, there needs to be a larger group of people working on the website in order for it to be relevant and up to date with the latest media literacy and cultural studies theory. I would suggest gathering a team of individuals that have a common interest and are going to be in the same place for an extended period of time. While the Internet makes it easier to connect with people who are not closely linked geographically, I argue that it is near to impossible to keep a project like this going without regular face to face interaction.

Thirdly, organizing the website itself was a major challenge. In categorizing each section by media we may have created an artificial barrier that hindered the growth of our ideas. By this, I mean that it is very difficult to organize items that are so interconnected. In the future, a major overhaul of the organization of the site is needed in order for it to flow better. Also, with a technologically aware person on the team we would better know our limitations or our advantages in terms of how our ideas can be used the Internet. Without being aware of these important aspects, it can be daunting to try and connect together ideas and yet organize them in an order that makes sense for the user.

Fourthly, another obstacle to this project was copyright laws. In creating a website based in cultural studies, media literacy and popular culture, it is important to have specific examples to back up your claims. Unfortunately, because copyright law is very
complicated, we didn't have the ability to incorporate many of the examples we wanted to. Future studies need to examine these laws closely in order to find what material is available to use for free. For a website like ours, we need to find as much free material to post as possible. One position could be to build a database of relevant videos and pictures so that we could reference these files whenever we need to demonstrate our theories or exercises. If “Emerald Lens” is to progress, it needs to have someone working on the team that is well versed in these laws.

In the future, “Emerald Lens” needs to incorporate many of the issues above and build a team of people that is willing to work long term on this project. Crucially, there needs to be a movement toward projects that will introduce the website to young people. There really is no reason for students to come across an educational website by themselves and use it on a regular basis. Therefore, a program needs to be implemented where either graduate students or undergrads go into high schools and conduct tutorials and workshops with the website. This type of initiative can serve several different objectives. First, we will build a space where we can gather data for future research. Many scholars examine youth culture without actually being in the thick of the culture they are studying. If we could create a comfortable space where we introduce young students to cultural studies, we can simultaneously gather data on any related youth topic. Also, this could be a space where we can gather the voices of young people in order to give them agency within our works. At the same time, these students will gain critical thinking skills which will help them in all of their classes into the future. Also, the academics running the workshops have the possibility of becoming mentors and role models for these kids. A program of this type will take a lot of coordination between high
schools and Bowling Green State University, but would be rewarding on all ends.

Working closely with the community will give this project more meaning to all involved.
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