The Literacy Control Complex

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- Respond To This Article

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1. Usually, a literature search is a benign phase of the research regime. It was, however, during this phase on my current project where a semi-conscious pique I’d been feeling developed into an obvious rancour. Because I’ve been involved in both electronic production and consumption, and the pedagogy surrounding it, I was interested in how the literate domain was coping with the transformations coming out of the new media communications r/evolution. This concern became clearer with the reading and re-reading of Kathleen Tyner’s book, Literacy in a Digital World: Teaching and Learning in the Age of Information. Sometimes, irritation is a camouflage for an emerging and hybridised form of knowledge, so it was necessary to unearth this masquerade of discord that welled-up in the most unexpected of places.

2. Literacy in a Digital World makes all the right noises: it discusses technology; Walter Ong; media literacy; primary, secondary, and tertiary schooling; Plato’s Phaedrus; psychoanalysis; storytelling; networks; aesthetics; even numeracy and multiliteracies, along with a host of other highly appropriate subject matter vis-à-vis its object of analysis. On one reading, it’s a highly illuminating overview. There is, however, a differing interpretation of Literacy in a Digital World, and it’s of a more sombre hue.

3. This other more doleful reading makes Literacy in a Digital World a superior representative of a sometimes largely under-theorised control-complex, and an un.conscious authoritarianism, implicit in the production of any type of knowledge. Of course, in this instance the type of production referenced is literate in orientation. The literate domain, then, is not merely an angel of enlightened debate; under the influence and direction of particular human configurations, literacy has its struggles with other forms of representation. If the PR machine encourages a more seraphical view of the culture industry, it comes at the expense of the latter’s sometimes-tyrannical underbelly. It is vital, then, to question and investigate these un.conscious forces, specifically in relation to the production of literate forms of culture and the ‘discourse’ it carries on regarding electronic forms of knowledge, a paradigm for which is slowly emerging electracy and a subject I will return to.

4. This assertion is no overstatement. Literacy in a Digital World has concealed within its discourse the assumption that the dominant modes of teaching and learning are literate and will continue to be so. That is, all knowledge is mediated via either typographic or chirographic words on a page, or even on a screen. This is strange given that Tyner admits in the Introduction that “I am an itinerant teacher; reluctant writer; sometimes belther; sometimes media producer” (1, my emphasis). The orientation in Literacy in a Digital World, it seems to me, is a mask for the authoritarianism at the heart of the literate establishment trying to contain and corral the intensifying global flows of electronic information. Ironically, it also seems to be a peculiarly electronic way to present information: that is, the sifting, analysis, and categorisation, along with the representation of phenomena, through the force of one’s un.conscious biases, with the latter making all knowledge production laden with emotional causation.

5. This awkwardness in using the term “literacy” in relation to electronic forms of knowledge surfaces once more in Paul Messaris’s Visual “Literacy”. Again, this is peculiar given that this highly developed and informative text might be a fine introduction to electracy as a possible alternative paradigm to literacy, if only, for instance, it made some mention of sound as a counterpoint to textual and visual symbolisation. The point where Messaris passes over this former contradiction is worth quoting:

> Strictly speaking, of course, the term “literacy” should be applied only to reading and writing. But it would probably be too pedantic and, in any case, it would surely be futile to resist the increasingly common tendency to apply this term to other kinds of communication skills (mathematical “literacy,” computer “literacy”) as well as to the substantive knowledge that communication rests on (historical, geographic, cultural “literacy”). (2-3)

6. While Messaris might use the term “visual literacy” reluctantly, the assumption that literacy will take over the conceptual reins of electronic communication and remain the pre-eminent form of knowledge production is widespread. This assumption might be happening in the literature on the subject but in the wider population there is a rising electracy sensibility.

7. It is in the work of Gregory Ulmer that electracy is most extensively articulated, and the following brief outline has been heavily influenced by his speculation on the subject. Electracy is a paradigm that requires, in the production and consumption of electronic material, highly developed competencies in both oracy and literacy, and if necessary comes on top of any knowledge of the subject or content of any given work, program, or project. The conceptual frame of electracy is herein tentatively defined as both a well-developed range and depth of communicative competency in oral, literate, and electronic forms, biased from the latter’s point of view. A crucial addition, one sometimes overlooked in earlier communicative forms, is that of the technate, or technacy, a working knowledge of the technological infrastructure underpinning all communication and its in-built ideological assumptions. It is in this context of the various communicative competencies required for electronic production and consumption that the term ‘literacy’ (or for that matter ‘oracy’) is questionable.

Furthermore, electracy can spread out to mean the following: it is that domain of knowledge
MEZ's posts have made me more cognisant of electronic forms of written expression. These dot, as an electronic form of conceptual elision, is another. If you are interested in this field, I highly considerable ability for condensation; the sound-bite is one epistemological example of this idea, the might be used. One of the many things that fascinates me about electronic communication is its not obvious, I do want to create a sense of intrigue in the reader as to why this dot configuration unconscious in the field of political action where any turf war is conducted. While this justification is electracy, and their broader relationship to patterns of political/economic/cultural organisation and control. It may be possible to trace the dichotomy outlined above between literate and electrate forms of knowledge to larger political/economic and cultural forces. As Saskia Sassen illustrates, sovereignty and territoriality are central aspects in the operation of the still important nation-state, especially in an era of encroaching globalisation. In the past, sovereignty referred to the absolute power of monarchs to control their dominions and is an idea that has been transferred to the nation-state in the long transition to representative democracy. Territoriality refers to the specific physical space that sovereignty is seen as guaranteeing. As Sassen writes, "In the main ... rule in the modern world flows from the absolute sovereignty of the state over its national territory" (3). Quite clearly, in the shifting regimes of geo-political power that characterise the global era, sovereign control over territory, and, equally, control over the ideas that might reconfigure our interpretation of concepts such as sovereignty and territoriality, nationalism and literacy, are all in a state of change. Today’s climate of geo-political uncertainty has undoubtedly produced a control complex in relation to these shifting power bases, a condition that arises when psychic, epistemological and political certainties move to a state of unpredictable flux.

In Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities another important examination of nationalism there is an emphasis on how literacy was an essential ingredient in its development as a political structure. Operational levels of literacy also came to be a key component in the development of the idea of the autonomous self that arose with democracy and its use as an organising principle in citizenship rituals like voting in some nation-states. Eric Leed puts it this way: “By the sixteenth century, literacy had become one of the definitive signs — along with the possession of property and a permanent residence — of an independent social status” (53). Clearly, any conception of sovereignty and territoriality has to be read, after being written constitutionally, by those people who form the basis of a national polity and over whom these two categories operate.

The "fundamental anxiety" over literacy that Kress speaks of (Before Writing 1) is a sub-component of this larger control complex in that a quantum increase in the volume and diversity of electronic communication is contributing to declining levels of literacy in the body politic. In the current moment there is a control complex of almost plague proportions in our selves, our systems of knowledge, and our institutions and polities, because it is undoubtedly a key factor at the epicentre of any turf war. Even my own strident anxieties over the dominance of literacy in debates over electronic communication deserve to be laid out on the analyst’s couch, in part because any manifestation of the control complex in a turf war is aimed squarely at the repression of alternative ways of being and becoming. The endgame: it might be wiser to more closely examine this literacy control complex, possible alternative paradigms of knowledge production and consumption such as electracy, and their broader relationship to patterns of political/economic/cultural organisation and control.

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Note on reading “The Literacy Control Complex”

The dot configuration in ‘un.conscious’ is used deliberately as an electronic marker to implicitly indicate the omni-directional nature of the power surges that dif.fuse the conscious and the unconscious in the sense of political action where any turf war is conducted. While this justification is not obvious, I do want to create a sense of intrigue in the reader as to why this dot configuration might be used. One of the many things that fascinates me about electronic communication is its considerable ability for condensation; the sound-bite is one epistemological example of this idea, the dot, as an electronic form of conceptual elision, is another. If you are interested in this field, I highly recommend perusal of the MEZ posts that crop up periodically on a number of media related lists. MEZ’s posts have made me more cognisant of electronic forms of written expression. These
experiments in electronic writing deserve to be tested.

**Works Cited**


**Citation reference for this article**

**MLA Style**


**APA Style**

You are a health literacy ambassador. It is up to you to make sure your colleagues, staff, leadership, and community are aware of the issues. Whether to review for yourself, present to others, or convince your leadership, the following resources may help you talk about health literacy. Five Talking Points on Health Literacy: These brief talking points may be helpful if you need to tell someone quickly what health literacy is and why it is important. Add in talking points relevant to your organization. Nine out of 10 adults struggle to understand and use health information when it is unfamiliar. Literacy and the acquisition of literacy are complex issues which require a strong commitment from parents, caregivers, highly dedicated professionals and society at large. Our Strategy adopts a lifelong perspective, with a clear priority on the first and early years. It is at this stage that the foundations of literacy, that will influence highly later development, are laid down for each child. The Strategy promotes also lifelong and intergenerational dimensions by supporting the crucial roles of the family and the community in supporting the literacy development of each child. Our bilingual