

# Application of Media Literacy and Cultural Studies in K–12 Social Studies Curricula

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In 2009 the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) released a position statement calling for the implementation of media literacy in social studies education. NCSS argues that if today's students are to become engaged citizens as adults, they must acquire the skills and knowledge associated with media literacy. Using this position statement as foundation, I developed a media literacy framework for use in the social studies classroom that applies prevailing theories on media and cultural studies. For consumers of media to engage in the practice of citizenship they need to acquire the tools needed to negotiate the waters of the many media texts that are produced. For a consumer of media texts to negotiate the meaning and influence of those texts, that consumer must use a framework that applies approaches that are *historical, empirical, interpretive, and critical*. As we shall see, these approaches are necessary if citizens are to engage effectively in a democracy that is flooded with such texts.

**Keywords:** citizenship, media literacy, historical, empirical, interpretive, critical

## Introduction

*In the days leading up to the ninth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001, a Gainesville, FL preacher is in the news. Pastor Terry Jones of the Dove World Outreach Center plans to burn copies of the Quran to celebrate the anniversary. A photograph of Pastor Jones and related story graces the cover page of the USA Today for Thursday, September 9, 2010.*

*Pastor Jones announces that he will not burn the Quran if a planned mosque is not built in New York City near Ground Zero. Jones' bargain leads to comments in the press by, among others, President Obama who asks Jones to reconsider his actions since they would cause a threat to the safety of American troops stationed abroad. CNN reports at 6pm on September 9, 2010, that real estate mogul and entrepreneur Donald Trump has offered one of the investors of the mosque the price paid for the land plus 25% if construction is moved to at least five blocks away from ground zero. Finally, Secretary of Defense John Gates calls Pastor Jones to urge him to rethink his plan since it would put U.S. soldiers in harm's way. In the end, the Pastor chooses not to hold the ceremonial burning.*

*On "The "Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer," the host is joined by democratic strategist Donna Brazile and republican*

*strategist John Feehery who claims that none of this would have happened if the media did not make the story into a circus. Later, they are joined by Jeffrey Toobin, CNN Senior Legal Analyst, who points out that Pastor Jones was "using his First Amendment rights, and so were we in deciding to cover this guy, and I think that's going to be the really hard question that WE'RE (his emphasis) going to have to answer about why we covered him in the first place. The only reason they (President Obama, etc.) talked about him is that we decided to give publicity to this bigot, this lunatic . . . I think the real question here is about the news media as much as it's about the Obama administration."*

To follow this news story, citizens engage in *information triage* to determine the relative importance of the information in understanding the events, the representations of world, framing of the story, and positions it offers to viewer/readers. For example, the story blends local, national, and international interests, it mixes religion and politics, it connects individuals (groups) for multiple levels of authority, and it hides and then questions the choices of production that represented and framed these events in these ways across media forms.

When considering all of the obligations of social studies teachers, one could argue that teaching citizenship is foremost on that list. Consequently, an acknowledgment of the importance of that position must lead to a discussion on the role media literacy in citizenship education and the social studies in general. After all, how can citizens engage in democratic practice without the ability to critically analyze available information in the modern media world?

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This problem was recognized in the spring of 2009 issue of *Social Education* when the National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS) released a position statement on media literacy in social education. As noted by the NCSS, “the multimedia age requires new skills for accessing, evaluating, creating, and distributing messages within a digital, global, and democratic society” (NCSS 2009, 187). In the United States, most citizens participate in a media-soaked environment with new demands on their abilities to understand and produce media texts. Many of those texts are commercially produced and distributed with the pedagogical intent to teach users what we should know, who we are, and what we should value. Moreover, it is likely, but certainly not proven, that learning to read and create media texts and engaging in informed discussions around the practices could lead to increased civic agency. I am convinced that media literacy has an important place in social studies classrooms and by extension in social studies teacher education program. This article seeks to make sense of prevailing media literacy theories and establish a pedagogical foundation for media literacy in social studies curricula.

It is important to note here that my work goes beyond the use of film studies in social studies—and this is congruent with the NCSS statement. Much has been written on the use of film (historical, Hollywood, etc.) in the social studies classroom, including the benefits and potential pitfalls. I acknowledge the importance and benefits on the use of film in teaching history (cf. Marcus 2007; Marcus et al. 2010; Wineburg 2001) and character and citizenship development (Russell 2010), and I acknowledge that my work stands on the shoulders of those authors. While film continues to be a dominant and useful medium in the social studies classroom, my goal is to develop a framework that can be used for *all* media. To accomplish this, I organize the work on media literacy and cultural studies around these four themes—*historical, empirical, interpretive, and critical*.

#### **A Four-Pronged Approach to Media Literacy in the Social Studies**

My application of media literacy theories to social studies is inspired by the work of James Carey (2009) and David Hesmondhalgh (2007). Carey remarks on the historical economics writings of Harold Innis as a benchmark for media studies in that Innis’ work was “historical, empirical, interpretive, and critical” (115). To be clear, Carey does not use these four terms to lay out a media literacy program; they merely afford him reference points for reflections on the work of Innis. That being said, the four terms provide me with a four-pronged approach to media literacy that has been absent in the literature. That is to say, these approaches have been used—there exists many authors who use critical or historical approaches, for example—but not in the manner that I propose. Furthermore, these approaches are not

exclusive; indeed, most existing research has used combinations of these approaches whether overtly or implicitly. For example, the media/cultural studies work of Stuart Hall routinely relies on all four approaches (i.e., Hall’s work contains historical, empirical, interpretive, and critical elements).

Through David Hesmondhalgh (2007) the study of media and culture moves from the theoretical to the practical. Hesmondhalgh focuses on the production of symbols and texts through what he refers to as the cultural industries. Hesmondhalgh’s view on communication culture focuses on how the production of texts influences our understanding of the world.

While the implication here is that capitalist industry has negatively influenced culture through commodification, it is important to avoid this simplistic worldview. Hesmondhalgh asserts that the cultural industries and the texts that they produce can be characterized as complex, ambivalent, and contested (4). *Complex* because there is an intricate web of symbiotic relationships between producers of cultural texts, the consumers of those texts, and government entities that regulate those texts. The cultural industries are *ambivalent* in the modus operandi of the cultural industries (i.e., the reasons that cultural industries produce texts in the first place) due to the fact that the commodification of texts is profitable. Finally, because of the continuing struggle between those who produce cultural texts and those who consume them, it is important to understand this *contested* nature of the cultural industries. Hesmondhalgh’s view of media and media production as being ‘complex, ambivalent, and contested’ should be a keystone in media literacy. Using Hesmondhalgh’s observations as a framework—that the media industries are ambivalent, complex, and contested—the four approaches become the building materials attached to that framework (see Figure 1).

As an experienced classroom teacher, I hesitate to provide a rigid formula for implementing media literacy or to imply that teachers must use the following framework lockstep. It has been my experience that such frameworks, when not imposed rigidly, are more easily adapted to varying teaching styles, interests, disciplines, etc. As the examples indicate, many teachers already include at least some of the elements in their classrooms. What I have found to be missing is a framework that can be applied to *all* forms of media—not just film. In fact, one can generate simple lists of examples in which media and disciplines within the social studies are intertwined.

In history, we could analyze the importance of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, or *The Federalist Papers* on the birth of the United States; the effects of William Randolph Hearst and yellow journalism on the Spanish-American War; the use of propaganda in the First and Second World Wars; news coverage of McCarthyism, the Vietnam War, the Rwandan Genocide, and coverage of the events of September 11, 2001. We could further analyze

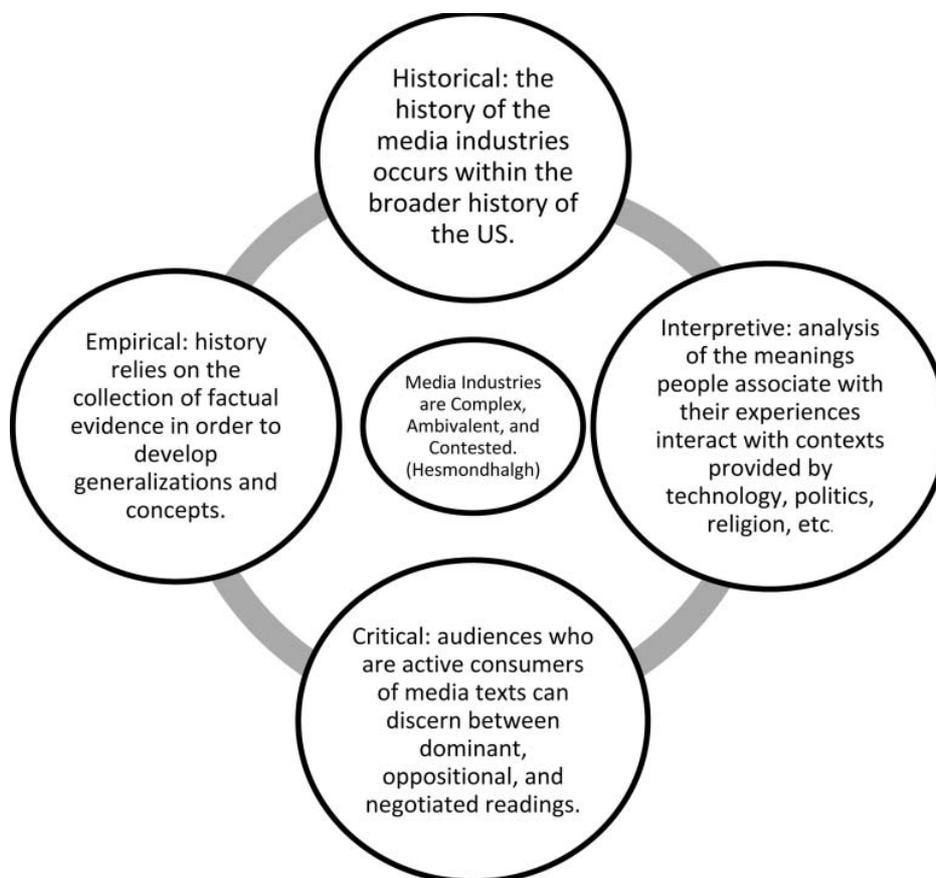


Fig. 1. The four interacting approaches for media literacy.

representations of all of those events in film, television, video games, etc.

In political science, we could analyze the media focus on hype (hoopla and horserace) in election coverage or the use of narratives in news reporting. In economics, we could discuss news coverage of the recent financial meltdown and subsequent recession. For example, consider the following headlines from the MSNMoney website:

“Stocks Rise As Europe Shores Up Its Finances,” October 12 (Peer 2011a)

“Stocks Waver on Europe Talks,” October 19 (Peer 2011b)

“Dow Jumps 340 on European, Economic News,” October 27 (Blaine 2011b)

“Dow Falls 276 on Europe, Economic Worries,” October 31 (Blaine 2011a)

A glance at those headlines can be confusing, because it would appear that European financial markets are simultaneously detrimental and beneficial to the U.S. stock market, depending on which week we are looking at. Should I buy or sell stock when considering events in Europe? Of course, international stock markets are considerably more complicated than that—and that is the point. As stated earlier, we

are constantly bombarded with news and information—a situation that requires constant *information triage* to determine the relative importance of the information in understanding the events, the representations of world, framing of the story, and positions it offers to viewer/readers.

We could also analyze representation of historic events in unlikely places; that is, a film or website or television program need not be *historical* by definition to contain historic elements. For example, in the science fiction film *The Adjustment Bureau* (Nolfi 2011), the protagonist—an up-and-coming politician (played by Matt Damon) stumbles onto a group of beings that direct or guide the actions of humans in their individual destinies. Based on the Cold War-era short story by Phillip K. Dick, it is implied that the beings in question may be angels or agents of a higher power such as God. Damon’s character has fallen in love with a woman that he is “not destined” to be with and confronts one of the beings, arguing that human kind should be permitted to exercise “free will.” The being replies that that was tried after the rise of the Roman Empire and that human beings exercising free will led to the dark ages and later to two world wars. These seemingly innocuous statements occur on the movie screen rather quickly and can easily

be dismissed, but their weight is substantial. What is being implied in this dialogue is a Western civilization version of history (the Dark Ages as a descriptor only occurred in Europe) and underscores the importance of the United States in world events (Damon's character must eventually run for president, something he may not do if involved with the woman in question). According to the "angels," it is important for *all* of humanity that Damon's character become president. The viewers' acceptance of the statements in the context of the film reaffirm the "upper case history" in which the role of the United States holds some inherent meaning or significance in a larger narrative (Parkes 2011). This will be discussed further below.

### Historical Thinking and Its Role in the Four Approaches

The implementation of media literacy into the social studies curriculum may require little more than the formalization of the practices that good teachers already have in their repertoire. However, the lack of formalization can result in a lack of consistency in learning outcomes. Simply stated, teaching the use of the four approaches to students early in the school year could yield benefits by establishing a criteria for all classroom work and research. The social studies teacher's approach to teaching media literacy should mirror how we approach teaching any of the other disciplines within the field. One would be hard pressed to teach any of those disciplines without reference to historical thinking. Sam Wineburg (2001) describes historical thinking as the process in which we all are:

Called on to see human motive in the texts we read; called on to mine truths from the quicksand of innuendo, half-truth, and falsehood that seeks to engulf us each day; called on to brave the fact that certainty, at least in understanding the social world, remains elusive and beyond our grasp. . . . The view of text described here is not limited to history (83).

Wineburg argues that historical thinking requires us to reconcile two contradictory positions. First, our understanding of history is a product of "inheritance" gleaned from historical narratives produced by culture and school textbooks that are notorious for eliminating "metadiscourse." Second, if we make no effort to discard this inherited understanding, we are "doomed to a mind-numbing presentism that reads the present into the past" (12). Applying the four approaches that I propose provides a framework in which to engage that reconciliation.

It is important to note that the use of the four approaches is not a step-by-step, linear process. In fact, the four can be used simultaneously, or in various combinations. I discuss each approach in turn followed by an analysis of two examples—one from social studies research and the other from the documented classroom practices of a social studies teacher.

### Historical

Social studies teachers ultimately bring to the table a working understanding of historical contexts through which to apply media literacy. The current state of media—how it is produced, distributed, and received—did not occur overnight. Understanding the history of how media evolved in the United States is crucial in achieving media literacy. The relationship between the communications and media industries with government regulation and oversight adds context when analyzing, for example, discourse on Internet providers and net neutrality (cf. Nunziato 2009; Wu 2010). In addition, historical accuracy is vital in understanding news events. In addition to the historical background of media, the historical approach serves media literacy by providing background knowledge essential to understanding and for checking historical accuracy of news stories, historical film, blogs—indeed all forms of media texts.

### Empirical

Historical understanding can be difficult to achieve without a connection to the empirical approach. The empirical approach provides us with a tool with which to work within the historical without bias—or at the least, to recognize when bias is present, why it exists, and how it impacts our understanding of media, and for that matter, the social sciences in general. Media effect research can be useful in this regard whether it concerns specific media uses or general trends of media and technology. For example, according to Shah, Rojas, and Cho (2009):

[A] new wave of research has not only found that electronic media use can have a positive effect on civic engagement, it has helped create a number of new arenas of inquiry, each one clarifying how mass media and civic life intersect (208).

Used as a solitary method of analysis, the quantitative nature of most media effects research can be problematic. Yet used in conjunction with approaches that provide context and balance (historical, interpretive, and critical), it becomes a valuable research tool. Furthermore, as Shah et al. (2009) point out, the current landscape of electronic media may hold promise for increased civic engagement.

Media effects research is also useful in identifying why, how, and where citizens engage with media—information that is useful in determining the impact of media on democracy. For example, media effects research can be useful in determining where people find information on political candidates, and in conjunction with the historical approach, can identify bias if it exists.

The empirical approach can also be used to collect further information on media texts to further understanding. Following the earlier discussion on the film *The Adjustment Bureau*, we could apply similar empirical processes of discourse analysis with other films. We could also analyze how the historical context of a text's production can influence

historical accuracy as in the case of James W. Loewen's (2009) analysis of the film *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming 1939). The film and Margaret Mitchell's book on which the film is based, were both created in the late 1930s. As such, both texts reflect the 1930s more so than the time period in which the story takes place, the Civil War-era South. While not viewed as an historical film, its pervasive status in American Culture has influenced our understanding of the antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction-Era South.

### Interpretive

Within the interpretive approach, we analyze the context provided by the historical and empirical. To apply the interpretive approach, we need to analyze and assess how the media industries operate as institutions and the creators of media texts—a process also necessary for the critical approach. In this realm, Stuart Hall's work on representation provides a foothold for media literacy in the social studies. According to Hall, since meaning is never fixed, then "it follows that 'taking the meaning' must involve an active process of interpretation. Meaning has to be actively 'read' or 'interpreted'" (Hall and Open University, 1997, 32). Historical markers, texts, sites, etc. all hold different interpretations to those who consume such texts.

Second, it is important that students create their own media texts—creating media texts provides us with a path for interpretation; interpretation helps us to understand other media texts. Examples of media texts that students can create include but are not limited to video/movie making (including video blogs), sound essays, and comics and graphic novels. As stated earlier, production of media texts needs to include an element of reflection, a process that moves back and forth through production and reflection.

### Critical

Critical media literacy encourages students to consider the questions of why a message was sent and where it came from. Too often, students believe the role of the media is to instantly entertain or inform while they have little knowledge of the economic structure that supports it. As noted by David Buckingham (2003):

Media literacy should not be conceived as an exercise in drawing attention to the shortcomings of media—whether these are defined as moral, ideological or aesthetic. On the contrary, it should encourage students to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of their pleasures in the media; and to recognize the social basis of all such judgments of taste and value, including their own (110).

David Buckingham's insight into critical discourse concerning the media sheds light on one of the pitfalls of critical analysis. To be critical implies a certain amount of arrogance in that it places undue emphasis and authority in one's own point of view and, to be clear, "rethinking ex-

tends beyond criticism" (Cherryholmes 1988, 14). However, the critical approach is important if we are to understand the relationship between media and the social studies.

Vital to the critical approach is the practice of historiography—the study of history. According to James W. Loewen (2009), "Historiography asks us to scrutinize how a given piece of history came to be. Who wrote this book? Who put up this marker? Who *didn't* put it up? What points of view were omitted?" (68). Historiography forces us to recognize that historical artifacts, texts, etc. have their own stories aside from the obvious. "Historiography is vital for any critical approach to the study of histories" (Parkes 2011, 99). Furthermore, we should apply historiography to texts that are not considered historical in the strictest sense. As discussed earlier in the case of the film *The Adjustment Bureau*, a media text need not be considered historical to make historical claims. However, we must recognize that those claims are presented to consumers of texts and influence our understanding of historical events regardless of the historical accuracy of those texts.

Sam Wineburg (2001) found this to be evident in his interview of high school students concerning their understanding of the Vietnam War. During interviews one student claimed that "he hears the epithet 'baby killer' aimed at Vietnam vets not once or twice but 'always'" (238). After further discussion, it becomes clear to Wineburg that the student's claims have been influenced by repeated family viewings of the film *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis 1994), not by any historical documentation that would support such a claim.

Again, a methodology that uses approaches that are historical, empirical, interpretive, *and* critical provides balance in media literacy and affords us the ability to rethink how we approach media literacy.

### Examples

Sarah A. Mathews (2009) offers practical suggestions for using popular culture in social studies classrooms. Her proposal for using episodes of the CBS reality television show, *The Amazing Race* (van Munster and Doganieri, 2001–2009) provides a valuable lens through which to apply the four approaches. Mathews reiterates that students need to develop skills to become critical consumers of media and that "In order to help foster continual participation in the civic process, social studies educators must begin to help students develop a range of skills for participating in a multimodal society as local, national, and global citizens" (247). On the surface, Mathews' focus is on how students might develop their ability to analyze media texts critically, yet her methodology includes the use of the four approaches. Of course, she does not label these as such, but her descriptions of the pedagogy she would implement definitely contain the approaches lying under the surface. For example, she describes the process for critiquing reality television as one that requires the *interpretation* of

particular texts and how they are impacted by the particular gaze one uses when interacting with those texts. Furthermore, “Students need to critically examine what social, *historical* [emphasis added], and political forces impact the particular gaze that they and others are using when they view and act on the world” (254). It is not the fact that Mathews is simply using the words *interpretive* and *historical*, but her descriptions clearly refer to the same processes that I propose.

In *Teaching History with Film: Strategies for Secondary Social Studies* (Marcus et al. 2010), the authors describe the practices of Ron Briley, a social studies teacher whose use of film in teaching history is worthy of note (75). Particularly of interest is how the teacher uses the film *Bonnie and Clyde* (1968) not to teach about the Depression-era bank robbers but to teach about the era in which the film was made, the 1960s. Like the analysis on the pedagogical use of *The Amazing Race*, Mr. Briley does not specifically identify the use of the four approaches. However, like Sarah A. Mathews, Ron Briley’s approach to classroom practices definitively includes those four elements.

Briley’s methods are *historical* in that he “spends weeks of class time helping students discover how to ‘read’ film. This involves an exploration of the technical aspects of making movies as well as how to investigate the historical context of films as texts” (75). The students engage in *empirical* study—reading and analyzing texts other than film—and interpret the impact of those texts through discussion and the writing of their own manuscripts. Finally, the students of Mr. Briley’s class analyze the films *critically*, engaging in assessments (written, discussion, etc.), probing the dominant and alternative readings of those texts at the time of the release of the film and how the film can be read in the present.

However, while the examples of Mathews and Briley reflect elements of my heuristic, their approaches do not appear to have a set framework. That is to say, the presence of my four elements appears to be happenstance and does not reflect a framework that is used for analyzing all media. Furthermore, it does not appear that either Mathews or Briley have presented a working methodology to the students for their further use. I propose that the four elements be introduced early in the school year and presented as a framework from which all learning is based. In a sense, this is like a magician letting the audience know how the trick is performed. From this point of view, the teacher demonstrates that she too is a consumer of media texts and processes textual meanings just as her students do.

Furthermore, the teacher should point out that the very act/process of selecting texts for the classroom can also be subjected to the framework. Any text presented as educational must be analyzed for perspective-laden narratives (Hess 2007), for each text not only influences our understanding of the past but the very fact that a teacher chose that text over others also demonstrates the proclivity of

some texts over others. For example, in a unit on World War II, a teacher’s decision to show *The Longest Day* (Anakin and Marton 1962) instead of or in addition to *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg et al. 1998) should be subjected to the same framework. How is the mode of address between one film made in 1962 and the other made in 1998 different? Has the era of the films’ production affected the historical interpretation of the events of the Normandy invasion (i.e., is their evidence of updated historical evidence)? Why has the teacher chosen to show one film over the other? Color versus black and white? The graphic portrayal of violence in one more so than the other? Recent recognizable cast versus one that is not? This process of analysis must be introduced for every media text used in a classroom, so that students learn to apply them outside of the classroom.

### Summary

While bold to say, the need for media literacy may arguably be one of the most important issues facing social studies educators today, and its relevance can be witnessed in news headlines. As of this writing, AT&T has sought the approval of the FCC in the purchase of T-Mobile—a merger that would leave only three major cell phone carriers (Verizon and Sprint being the other two) and little competition within the industry (Wyatt 2011). The Walt Disney Corporation has broken ground on a new \$4.4 billion theme park in Shanghai, China, to gain access to China’s 1.3 billion residents as not only a market for the park but also for Disney’s films and toys (Barnes and Barboza 2011). While I cannot safely say how these actions will affect our students, I do know that it is important for them to be educated on the possible implications on their own lives. Media literacy needs to be viewed as a part of the social studies as much as history, economics, geography, civics, etc. if we are to help students develop into engaged, democratic citizens.

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