

**The Aspen Institute
Communications and Society Program
NATIONAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE ON MEDIA LITERACY**

FOREWORD
by

Charles M. Firestone
Director, The Aspen Institute
Communications and Society Program
and
Conference Moderator

The communication process involves transmission, a medium, and reception. Most communications policies, even those aimed at enhancing citizen access to a diversity of information sources, look to the transmission and media elements of the process. They pay little attention to the receiver. The emerging media literacy movement seeks to create greater awareness and empowerment on the part of the human receiver, whether child or adult, in the school or outside of it. Generally, policy-makers understand that access to information needs physical connection and economic ability to access. But access also has a literacy component, that is communications competency. Despite the logic of attending to such literacies, the field is sorely under-appreciated in the United States.

The Conference

The purpose of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy was to shape a national framework or blueprint in which individual groups and institutions find their respective places, and from which funders, policy makers or critics can also assess individual or collaborative efforts and outcomes. This precise focus of the conference derived from an observation at a 1992 meeting on media literacy at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. There, it was suggested that the various and disparate media literacy groups in the United States were not gaining their objectives in part because funders and policy-makers were confused by lack of clarity and understanding as to what the various organizations did, how they related, and what the overall goals are. By building a common vision, framework, and understanding, each group could demonstrate its own niche and role in achieving the common objectives.

In December, 1992, 25 representative leaders of the media literacy movement met at the Aspen Institute's Wye Woods campus to achieve these goals. In my opinion, the group made great progress in doing just that. By adjournment, these leaders agreed on a definition, vision, and framework for the foreseeable future of media literacy in the United States. Patricia Aufderheide's report details the group's approaches and conclusions. They now face the very difficult task of following up on the considerable progress made at Wye with extremely few resources and funding sources available to them at this time.

Definition

The groups' representatives settled on a basic definition of media literacy: it is the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes. This definition could be expressed in many different ways. To some, analyzing was better expressed as decoding or evaluating, and producing was better explained as encoding or providing alternative expression. Information, too, had several meanings, from bare symbols to a

continuum of media that extends from print to video, to the new digital world of computerized multi-media.

More controversial was the extent to which outcomes should be a part of the definition of media literacy. Is media literacy important only to the extent that it enables one to be a better citizen in society? What is the role of ideology in the process? To what extent is an individual media literate if she just appreciates the aesthetics of a message without going further with it?

Resolution

The two days of discourse during the conference were rich with ideas and inspired debate. In the end, the leaders saw common ground on a number of levels. They agreed to try to work together more closely in order to bring about the broader goal of effectuating media literacy in the United States. It was recognized that, in the long run, the movement needed an institution that could generate research, coordinate publicity, determine a public policy agenda and foster relationships among media literacy groups, policy makers and the public at large. They endorsed one project in the State of New Mexico as a test site where the various groups might work in concert to foster media literacy in the schools and beyond. They agreed to an informal network where projects would be coordinated, and others interested in the subject would be included. And they agreed that they would create three task forces and three work products, if possible, as a result of this meeting.

First, a Task Force will look at the issues associated with curriculum and teacher training. This Task Force will suggest a future course for curriculum, and make specific suggestions regarding teacher training for media literacy pre-service, in-service, and specifically during the summer by a variety of institutes.

Second, a Task Force will foster communications among the various groups and individuals interested in media literacy. This Task Force will establish one or more networks, identifying resources such as the database being created by the National Telemedia Council and the National Association of Media Education, avoiding unnecessary duplication of efforts, and arrive at common positions on issues where possible and where helpful.

Third, a Task Force will begin the process of writing a prospectus for a Media Literacy Institute on a grander scale than any of the groups had previously envisaged. This Institute would bring together in one organization the resources for an intellectual underpinning, teacher training, and active participation in policy-making and events. In turn, it would foster greater awareness of the need for media literacy, and more effective implementation of the goals of media literacy.

Outreach

The following Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, then, is a summary of the thinking and deliberation that led to these task forces and resolve of the groups represented at the meeting. In order to be effective, these meetings are limited in the number of participants. Thus many leaders of the movement could not attend this particular meeting. Yet, by the representative nature of those who did attend and with a commitment by those participants to reach out to other interested parties, we believe that

this process will yield a positive and productive framework for future development of media literacy in the United States.

We thank The Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Catherine T. and John D. MacArthur Foundation, and the L.J. Skaggs and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation for their grants which made this project possible. We also thank Patricia Aufderheide for her rapporteur's summary, and Frances J. Davis for his background paper on the topic, both of which are attached. Each of the participants listed at the end of this volume generously gave his or her time to participate in the meeting, and will be giving even more time in the future to follow up on task force projects. We want to acknowledge Elizabeth Thoman, Kathleen Tyner and Mariely Rowe for their help in conceptualizing and planning the conference. And finally, we want to thank Katharina Kopp, the Aspen program coordinator on this project, and Catherine Clark, her predecessor, for their editorial work on the program and the reports.