# Media Literacy:
## A New Type of Communication Skill

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## Abstract

The ability to effectively, efficiently, and appropriately deal with media is known as media literacy. The purpose of the present paper is to describe and discuss the concept of media literacy and the state of media literacy education in Japan. We first describe the traditional media literacy concept, which began to spread in Japan in the 1990s, and introduce our own three-stage development model of this media literacy concept. Next, we discuss the newer concept of media literacy presented by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications in 2000 and describe the background of the establishment of this concept. We also present an explanation of this change in the media literacy concept. We then describe the current state of Japanese media literacy education and introduce an excellent study conducted in a Japanese elementary school. Finally, we point out three problems in Japanese media literacy education that need to be solved.

***Key words***: Media literacy, Children, Television, Education

## What is Media Literacy?

Because children are now constantly exposed to a wide variety of media, helping children develop the ability to effectively, efficiently, and appropriately deal with media has become a focus of interest. This ability is known as "media literacy." More specifically, the development of media literacy is the development of the ability to accurately understand information obtained from media, to take advantage of media, and to skillfully communicate information through media. The development of media literacy for electronic media—such as television, video, video games, computers, the Internet, and mobile phones—is considered important.

### Why is media literacy attracting attention?

The development of media literacy has been attracting attention for the following reasons.

First, as described above, electronic media is not merely a part of children's lives, but its importance in their lives is constantly increasing. Children's ability to skillfully handle electronic media is therefore important. Although the word "media" has traditionally meant written media such as books, newspapers, and magazines, these traditional media formats have been replaced by visual media such as TV, video games, and the Internet. In accordance with the shift from a written media culture to a visual media culture, the skills required to handle media have changed.

Second, since recently developed electronic media are not only a part of people's lives but are also affordable and of high quality, it will be quite beneficial to take advantage of such media. For example, shooting and editing a video to create a movie once required professional equipment and skills, but in recent times, many people can easily make a movie simply by using a video camera and a PC.

Third, there have been a number of concerns, comments, and opinions about potential problems caused by electronic media. These issues include the potential for children to become violent because of watching violence on TV; to become reserved, withdrawn individuals incapable of actively establishing interpersonal relationships because of too much time devoted to video games or surfing the Internet; and to become victims of Internet-based dating sites or fraudulent business. It is therefore urgently necessary to develop children's ability to avoid these potentially harmful influences and events.

### Objective of this paper

The objective of this paper is to describe how the concept of media literacy, which has recently been attracting much attention, and ideal media literacy education have been established in Japan.

First we will describe the concept of media literacy. The word "literacy" as used in the expression "media literacy" literally means the ability to read and write. Media literacy, then, literally means the ability to read and write media. This can be better understood as the

ability to accurately understand information obtained from media and to create information using media tools.

The concept of media literacy in Japan, however, has changed over time; therefore, both the old and new concepts of media literacy will be described herein.

After describing the two concepts of media literacy, we will discuss media literacy education by using a major practical example. Finally, suggestions for future studies on media literacy education will be provided.

## Traditional Concept of Media Literacy

### Introduction of the concept of media literacy to Japan

Traditionally, media literacy means to accurately and appropriately understand information obtained from media. In particular, the importance of a critical understanding of media has been its focus. The word "critical" here does not mean to perceive all information in negative ways or to distrust it; instead, it means to apply logical and unbiased thinking and to believe information if there are appropriate standards or backgrounds for assessment (Sugaya, 2000).

It is believed that the term and concept of media literacy began to spread in Japan in the 1990s. It had spread earlier in foreign countries such as Canada and England; media literacy-related education was adopted as an official curriculum for school education in 1988 in Ontario, Canada, and in 1989 in England.

*Media Literacy: Understanding Mass Media* is a Japanese translation of a textbook published by the Ontario Ministry of Education (1992) and used in Ontario, Canada, the first place in the world in which media literacy education was adopted as an official curriculum. This book is the most typical book in its field, and media literacy introduced in this book is the traditional form of media literacy. After the introduction of the translated version of this book, interest in the concept of media literacy increased in Japan.

### Detailed structure of media literacy

The textbook from Ontario introduces eight key concepts of media literacy and claims that the goal of media literacy education is to teach these key concepts. Table 1 shows these concepts.

**Table 1**   Media literacy in Ontario, Canada

(1) All media are constructions.
(2) The media construct reality.
(3) Audiences negotiate meaning in the media.
(4) Media have commercial implications.
(5) Media contain ideological and value messages.
(6) Media have social and political implications.
(7) Form and content are closely related in the media.
(8) Each medium has a unique aesthetic form.

The first concept, "All media are constructions," is the most important concept of all, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the goal of media literacy is to achieve an understanding of this concept. All media messages are the creations of their senders, and it is necessary to clearly understand that message senders select and edit information in accordance with their own intentions. This understanding can be divided into three developmental stages; we believe that individuals experience and understand these stages one by one. The stages are as follows:

The first stage. In this stage, individuals are able to pay attention not only to what is shown but also to what is not shown. Individuals can use a single resource as well as multiple resources to check whether particular information can be trusted. Therefore, individuals in this stage understand that messages from media to which they are exposed are not the only information that exists. This understanding is meaningful when finding solutions to the adverse effects of media. For example, a TV program featuring a hero may have a storyline in which a monster shown as a bad character behaves violently and troubles many people, and then the hero comes, defeats the monster, and saves the people. If children blindly accept all of what is shown in this program, they learn that violence is an effective means of solving problems, and this may result in increased aggressiveness in children. If, however, these children understand that this tale only shows one side of the whole story—for example, the monster actually had a child and the fact that the monster was killed by the hero was a tragedy for the monster's child—these children can then understand issues of violence more deeply, and concern about the adverse effects of violence may be reduced.

The second stage. In this stage, individuals are able to pay attention not only to what is shown but also to what is not shown, and they can understand the intentions or factors that media creators consider when deciding what to show and not show.

In general, messages conveyed by media are believed to be influenced by a variety of intentions or factors. One example of these is the beliefs or values of the message sender. For instance, when newspaper companies that are considered to be right-wing or left-wing publish a report on modern Japanese history, they may report on the same topic, but their reports will have different stories.

A second example is the taste of message recipients such as viewers and readers. Some people believe that an increased number of housewives watch TV during the daytime on weekdays; thus, since housewives tend to like program content that is more liberal than conservative, an increased number of TV programs with liberal themes are broadcast during that time period. On weekends, on the other hand, an increased number of conservative

adult males watch TV; therefore, it is believed that an increased number of TV programs with conservative content are broadcast on weekends. If this is true, it means that broadcast stations take viewers' tastes into account. Similarly, it is possible that the creator of the abovementioned TV program featuring a hero positively portrays the hero's violent behavior because the creator thinks that children will look up to an impressive hero and will like to see him defeat the monster with powerful and extraordinary actions.

A third example is the intention of TV program sponsors. If a company that manufactures fashionable clothing sponsors a particular program, it is important for the sponsor that those who like fashionable clothing watch the program as well as the company's commercial. Therefore, the sponsor wants the program to have content that attracts those who like fashionable clothing, and the TV program producer must keep that in mind.

Senders of media messages create messages while examining various factors such as the cost of article or program creation. If individuals can understand or at least think about the existence of these factors, they can analyze what kind of factors influence the media messages when they actually see them. As a result, they are able to determine how many of the sources of those messages they can trust.

The third stage. In this stage, individuals first analyze various types of factors that influence media messages and then assess whether these messages are expressed appropriately or wisely or if they are of good quality. Those individuals are then able to appreciate the messages. For example, instead of simply losing themselves in the world of a video game, individuals are able to review the skills of game creators and to understand and appreciate at a high level the quality of the work. The ultimate goal of media literacy education is to learn how to maintain some distance from media messages in order to review and appreciate them instead of being misled by them or becoming too involved in them. At this stage, individuals have a very good understanding of media messages.

While the first stage was once the most important stage in the traditional concept of media literacy, the second and third stages have gained importance with the introduction of new concept of media literacy. In fact, according to a study by Sugaya (2000), which introduced the history of Europe where the concept of media literacy was popular from a long time, while the role of traditional media literacy was once simply to avoid the adverse effects of media, the concept of media literacy has changed to be more accepting of media. This is believed to correspond to the shift in importance from the first to the third stage. Previously, the disadvantage of not being involved with media used to be marginal, but now, the effectiveness of media use has become an important issue in response to the fact that the effectiveness and convenience of media have improved. Thus, the changes in the concept of media literacy may be based on the necessity to have the ability to skillfully deal with media instead of simply moving away from it.

## Concept of Media Literacy Suggested by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC)

Traditional media literacy was once a necessary ability for the recipients of media messages. Its definition, however, has been expanded to include the skills of media users or of media message senders. In Japan, this global trend is represented by the concept of media literacy proposed by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications (MPT). The MPT was integrated with the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Management and Coordination Agency in January 2001, forming the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC).

### Background of the establishment of the new concept of media literacy

In the 1990s, the introduction of the rating and V-chip systems were proposed and discussed in countries such as the US in order to respond to concerns about adverse effects of violent scenes shown in TV programs targeting children. The rating system requires broadcasters to rate their own TV programs based on the level of inappropriateness for viewing by children and to provide the rating result to parents prior to broadcasting. The V-chip system requires TV receiver manufacturers and distributors to pre-install a V-chip in a TV receiver in order to block the broadcasting of TV programs that are not suitable for viewing.

In accordance with this trend, the issue of whether or not these systems should be introduced was discussed in Japan. The subject frequently came up at expert meetings held by the MPT. These systems were eventually introduced in the US; however, in Japan, the discussions emphasized that inappropriate TV programs should be dealt with through the introduction of media literacy education rather than through the rating or V-chip systems.

As a result, in November 1999, the MPT established the Research Council on Media Literacy in Broadcasting, consisting of members derived from educational and media research fields, schools, regional educational institutions, citizen groups, and broadcasters. The concept of media literacy was put together in a report created in June 2000. It was based on the common understanding that media literacy was the *power to live* in a media society and was essential for the sound development of a democratic society comprising individuals with different values. And the three key

factors of media literacy concept were presented there.

### Detailed structure of media literacy

The first key factor of the three is the ability to independently understand the media, which coincides with the traditional concept of media literacy. Note that this factor consists of the following two abilities: the ability to understand the characteristics of each type of media that distributes information and the ability to critically analyze, assess, and closely examine information provided by the media in a social context and then to actively select it.

This factor is characterized by the fact that it emphasizes independence and proactive behavior. This is not always included in the overseas definition of media literacy. Independence in learning has been valued in terms of the newer concept of academic performance established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), and the trend of Japanese media literacy coincides with it.

The second key factor is the ability to access and effectively use media tools. In other words, it is the ability to select, operate, and actively as well as effectively use media tools. According to a report by the Research Council, obtaining necessary information from the media requires the ability to select appropriate media and operate corresponding tools. For example, if individuals have the ability to use computers and the Internet, effective use of these tools allows people to easily retrieve a huge volume of information that TV and newspapers cannot provide. Not only the ability to obtain information but also the ability to use media tools to create or distribute information is considered important. This ability may include, for example, the use of a video camera to shoot a movie, the use of a computer to edit it, and the creation of the final product. It has been noted that active use of media tools can improve individuals' understanding of media.

The third key factor is the ability to communicate through media, specifically defined as the ability to carry out interactive communication with information recipients. In the future media society, it will be important for individuals to create easy-to-understand messages by planning how to translate their own thoughts into media messages while considering what the message recipients will think or feel. In order to do so, individuals must have not only the hardware skills as described in the second key factor, but also the software skills that constitute the third key factor, so that they can come up with effective cuts or scenarios.

These three individual factors interact with each other, and it seems that improvement of one factor leads to the improvement of the remaining factors. Therefore, while it was traditionally believed that adverse effects of media on children should be dealt with by developing the ability to effectively receive information, as described as the first key factor, it has recently been noted that the development of the abilities to use media tools and to distribute media messages—the second and third factors, respectively—can also help individuals deal with these issues.

### Why has the concept of media literacy changed?

As described above, traditional media literacy or media literacy seen as the ability to receive information encouraged the avoidance of media. However, with the improvement of the effectiveness and convenience of media, modern media literacy has developed a more positive view of media. Recently, the definition of media literacy has expanded to include not only the ability to receive information but also the ability to use and distribute media messages; therefore, the development of media literacy now includes active interaction with media. This development is attributed to the fact that the effectiveness and convenience of media have improved and that, instead of turning away from media, the skillful manipulation of media is becoming increasingly beneficial. As described earlier, in the past, a final product or information package could not be created without using professional equipment and skills; however, recently, it has become possible for many people to easily do so, as the use of cheap video cameras has become widespread. Therefore, whether individuals can respond to these changes seems to determine how wisely and smoothly they can lead their lives.

## Media Literacy Education

As described at the start of this paper, improvement of media literacy is necessary, and media literacy education is therefore important. The level of actual media literacy education that is currently being implemented, however, does not match with what the importance of media literacy education requires.

Currently, the development of computer and Internet skills is being fully promoted, since information education is included as an official school education curriculum as dictated by Education Ministry guidelines. However, facilities and equipment issues have been pointed out: schools still need more computers and the installation of in-school LANs has been delayed. In addition, although information education has been a part of the official curriculum, elementary schools do not have a subject specializing in information education and it may not actually be taught in school very often. Therefore, it is frequently pointed out that the current state of information education is far from what it should be.

Meanwhile, the development of media literacy, including the mass-media-related abilities described in this paper, is not a part of the official curriculum;

therefore, the implementation status of education in this field is far behind that of computer and Internet education. Although recent Japanese textbooks have content that teaches media literacy—making it seem like the implementation of media literacy education has been expanding—it is still not wide or active enough.

As described above, media literacy education has not been sufficiently provided yet, but there are still some excellent practical examples of its proliferation. The next section introduces the education implementation by the Kasaoka Media Literacy Education School Curriculum Development Committee (2005).

### Example of excellent implementation of media literacy education

The Matsushita Education Foundation presents an annual Research Award to honor the excellent implementation of education. The institution in this example received the MEXT Minister's Award, the highest honor in the three subcategories of the Research Award.

The Kasaoka Media Literacy Education School Curriculum Development Committee implemented project study programs in cooperation with external human resources and a local CATV broadcaster in order to improve the media literacy of elementary school children. The project consisted of three sequential practice stages that comprised 110 credit hours. The description of each stage is as follows.

The first stage. In this 30-credit-hour stage, children learned about the characteristics of media and information through analysis and discussion of TV programs. They learned the following characteristics of media: there are many types of media that people are exposed to every day; the same subject can communicate different information depending on whether it is shot in close-up or in panorama; when communicating information using a combination of a photo and sentences, it is a good idea to use a photo whose message can be understand at a glance and sentences that supplement what the photo cannot express; catch phrases are designed to emphasize the best features of products; and even though the same materials are collected from a sample at the same time, the resulting video images can communicate totally different information depending on the intention of the photographers or editors.

An examination of what children wrote and said during the class revealed that during this stage, they realized that they must be more aware of what exactly their messages will be when shooting videos with digital cameras. They also learned that the same TV program can be understood in different ways depending on its viewers, and that the articles that they created had a lot of unnecessary words.

The second stage. In this 60-credit-hour stage, children created videos based on clear intentions. A total of 131 children from four classes that participated in this project study were divided into 24 groups; each group created a video of approximately 30 seconds. They first considered what they wanted to tell people outside the school and decided on a theme. Then, during the course of creation, repeated self-assessments and mutual assessments were carried out from the perspective of whether the messages were communicated in an easy-to-understand way. Furthermore, experts on video creation were invited to give advice at an interim examination meeting attended by all children. On the basis of the advice given, children repeatedly re-interviewed their subjects and re-edited their videos to complete their work.

During the course of video creation described above, the children realized the following: voices could be replaced with captions in order to eliminate unnecessary elements and shorten the duration of the video; the most important message should be identified and used as the program title; as many images as possible must be used to communicate messages; and one must have the courage to remove extraneous elements, as messages must be reduced to only what really needs to be communicated. As a result, the children's video content was to the point and high in quality.

The third stage. In this 20-credit-hour stage, videos were broadcast by the local CATV broadcaster. For this event, children put together their messages in a leaflet, carried out PR activities, held a presentation meeting to introduce finished work to parents and other students, and reviewed the achievement of their learning activities. Also, in this final stage, children reviewed what they had learned so far about how to deal with media, and formed thoughts about their encounters with a wide variety of values as well as the expansion and deepening of their perspectives on how information should be received.

The children then made comments on the program, including the following:

"I used to blindly believe all information from TV programs, but now I watch TV while wondering if particular information is necessary for me as well as its accuracy."

"I often think about the importance of communicating in an easy-to-understand way, such as making eye contact, using effective material, and using a handwritten or typed letter depending on which has more desirable features for a particular purpose."

"I would like to use my judgment to effectively use information, and for this reason, I have studied using TV programs and the Internet."

As described above, this study was a highly proactive approach to media literacy education, and it seemed that positive learning effects could be expected. In fact, what children wrote and said during the program as well as how they acted while they tried to improve their videos

suggest that the expected effects were realized.

## Conclusion:
## Future Media Literacy Education

Although there have been some examples of media literacy implementation that are proactive or that produce desirable effects, media literacy education still has a number of issues to address and is therefore under development.

First, although the acquisition of computer and Internet skills has been fully promoted since information education began to be included in the official education curriculum, some say that the positioning of computer/Internet skill education is not strong enough, and mass-media-related education—including TV programs and newspapers—is not included in the official curriculum.

Second, in Japan, media literacy education has a short history, as it began to attract attention only recently. Therefore, teachers and parents have never received media literacy education, and as a result, it is difficult for them to teach or give instructions in this area.

Third, media literacy education's short history also causes problems regarding teaching materials or methods. While teaching materials and methods have been developed for computer/Internet skill education with the support of MEXT, teaching materials and methods for mass-media-related media literacy education have not been developed, studied, or disseminated.

The problems listed above seem to prohibit the propagation and development of media literacy education. In the future, we hope that these problems will be solved and that highly effective media literacy education will be implemented in school and social education.

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