



Resource Review

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Review:

Art Silverblatt's third edition of *Media Literacy* updates previous editions by refining conceptual changes and updating the text with new developments, references and examples. It is structured into four main parts: an introduction to media literacy; a theoretical overview discussing cultural and historical contexts and production elements in establishing a methodological framework; a media formats part focused on four formats (Journalism; Advertising; American Political Communications; Digital Media Communications) geared towards application of the methodological framework by students; and a final part on media issues. Within these four parts are sections and chapters and the book as a whole adopts a schematic approach to guiding the reader. As part three on student application and analysis highlights most clearly, *Media Literacy* is organised in a textbook format with worksheets, tips boxes, exercises and summary sections. It would be an appropriate resource for students and course tutors across Secondary, Further and first year Undergraduate Higher education.

Rather than offering a literature focused introduction that points the reader to previous works (such as Masterman, 1985; Luke, 1994; Kellner and Share, 2005), Silverblatt sets out his own media literacy definition. There are brief references to national literacy organisations but ultimately the reader is left to situate Silverblatt's approach in relation to other media literacy works on their own. This is effective as

part of the textbook style and the sections on obstacles to media literacy and levels of meaning are extremely clear and concise as a result.

Part one, section one opens with chapter two, 'Elements of Communication', and a very accessible and basic overview of the communication process primarily comparing interpersonal and mass communication and associated factors such as interference and feedback, media saturation and the industry, message preservation and media as a collaborative process. This is a brief section that could be looked over by all except those seeking the most thorough and basic grounding.

The 'Process' section of part one continues with chapters three and four. Chapter three considers "media communicators" and issues of ownership and "architects" and communication functions. The ownership and 'architects' sections are all too brief and I could not help thinking the reader would be better served in turning to more detailed accounts. For example the 'architects' page on content creators extends to anecdotes from the television industry whilst equally accessible accounts seek to consider the specificity of this role and situate it in relation to broader industry issues (Hesmondhalgh's 2007 discussion of "symbolic creators" for example). It is not overly clear why there are two chapters with the 'Process' heading covering these areas and this organisation can make the book difficult to navigate sometimes. Chapter four addresses comparative media and audience and, as with chapter three and all the chapters in Part two, these sections form the basis of later media format specific discussion.

The 'Context' section of part one opens with historical context. The inter-relation between history and media presentations is engagingly discussed with examples to suggest how media can add to and distort understandings of historical events and conversely how historic events can offer perspectives on media presentations. The second half of the chapter adopts a media systems approach and uses biological and ecological analytical constructs systems and evolutionary metaphors. The examples and insights covering a range of media and addressing contexts of invention and development are very interesting, for example the telephone and Internet. The 'evolutionary stages' framework is then followed by 'principles of ecology' that turns from invention and development to consider how new media can be a threat, then specialise and then be assimilated. A perhaps unmanageable number of frameworks and constructs are introduced for a twenty page chapter but all generally guide the reader and are illustrated with engagingly delivered examples.

The next chapter on 'Cultural Context' is less heavy on frameworks and instead opts for sub-headings. This chapter offers accessible introductions to cultural ideologies, stereotyping and values hierarchy. Some further direction to key works and authors with regard to cultural studies, hegemony and ideology would have been helpful. The issues are broken down with illustrations and examples, mainly from North American media as with most chapters, and would encourage the consideration of various perspectives for those new to the debates. Methodologically a list based framework is offered for content analysis and strategies for identifying value systems. Often the approach stressed with these frameworks is uncovering the truth and tooling the students with the skills and approaches necessary to explore the constructed nature of media presentations. Further to this and following some of the contributions in Nowak et al (2007) (see Bragg for example), these frameworks may benefit from a consideration of the situated experiences of students and their position and relation to both the framework and objects of analysis.

The final chapter in the 'Context' section is titled 'Structure' and addresses media ownership and structure. Again, at this stage the focus here is more on flagging up issues as part of the 'keys to interpreting media messages' framework rather than media literacy teaching. Issues include consolidation of media ownership, derivative

programming, cross promotion and a case study of television news operations. At the end of this section there is a series of prompt questions relating to the context chapter which could be integrated into classroom discussions and/or used by students independently as investigation prompts.

Picking up from the previous section's focus on context the next section 'Framework', addresses media presentations themselves with chapter eight discussing introduction and plot and chapter nine discussing genre and conclusion. Potentially the most helpful aspect of chapter eight is the 'Media Literacy Tips' box on 'Taking notes on film/television programming' and addressing implicit and explicit content. Chapter nine's discussion of genre offers the kind of structured and comprehensive analysis that is typical of the book but, as with other chapters and topics, some reference to wider reading could help students engage with a number of broader issues (Neale, 1980 and Fiske, 1987 are some frequently cited examples). For example, Silverblatt briefly notes that "a genre may contain shared latent functions" (p.151) but this falls short of detailed analysis such as offered by Feuer considering audience positions and how ideologies can be embedded in a text (1992). The substitution of latent functions for ideology may make studying genre more accessible but it may equally push to the side some of the implications the study of ideology could help students address. As in all cases this would be something that a tutor using *Media Literacy* could approach with students and the discussion remains illuminating.

In relation to section four on 'Production Elements', I would stress that Silverblatt offers a thorough, well illustrated and comprehensive overview of a range of elements including editing, lighting, movement, angle and performance. The emphasis is generally on using the discussion and examples to analyse media presentations rather than explore potential student or Do-It-Yourself production.

The first of the 'Media Formats' sections is on journalism and the sections from Part two structure the format specific discussions that follow. This is helpful given that readers may be able to develop more general insights with regard to journalism and for the purposes of this review this also indicates what the chapter primarily deals with. There are a lot of sub sections and the discussion moves quickly through these with examples being more brief illustration than sustained analysis. This does not necessarily mean quantity over depth but rather that the broad and comprehensive coverage will probably leave readers needing much further reading, unfortunately not suggested, in specific areas. What is offered more is an overview and a way to engage with issues. The pressing need for further reading is especially so given the sources (mainly journalists and his daughter on at least one occasion: p.391) that Silverblatt generally opts for. Given the range of examples offered in the 'Media Formats' chapters it is a too great a task to give even an overview in this review. What can be summarised though are that the examples are engagingly presented and the 'Media Literacy Tips' boxes are useful resources offering guidance and suggesting analysis exercises.

The final part on 'Issues and Outcomes' uses the frameworks and approaches adopted throughout to consider media issues including media violence, social change and global communications. A solid grounding and introduction are offered in these sections and the range of sub-headings and structuring points work well here to suggest a diversity of perspectives and ways to tackle these issues. The final chapter on 'outcomes' considers "steps that can be taken to improve our communication environment" and is the closest *Media Literacy* gets to exploring possibilities as to how the reader may integrate analysis with forms of action.

The strengths of *Media Literacy* lie in the comprehensive and comparative framework for analysis it offers the reader and the range and clarity of, albeit somewhat ethnocentrically fixed, current examples. With regard to media literacy and critical

media education the books seems out of step with approaches emphasizing media production and theory and practice intersections. Nevertheless, *Media Literacy* is a well organised valuable grounding perfectly pitched for those new to the study of media and media analysis.

References

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