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Media Literacies
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## *The Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961*

**Introduction**

The online artifact for this assignment was created using *SlideRocket[1],* a web service that produces digital presentations viewable online as well as at live on-site presentations. While for this paper the *content* of the artifact was secondary to the structure or package of the artifact, I have chosen to have the content also deal with literacy; in this case, the Literacy Campaign that took place in Cuba in 1961.

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We recommend that you view the Cuban Literacy Campaign presentation prior to reading the exegesis. It is online at:  http://portal.sliderocket.com/AFJAS/Cuba-Literacy

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**Purpose**

The purpose of this exegesis and its accompanying artifact is to demonstrate that much of today's new media has the potential to be consumed *without* basic reading and writing literacy. Yet the project's purpose is also to demonstrate that without basic literacy skills, even new media cannot be fully utilized and the consumer has no way to critically analyze the information he or she has obtained through that new media. Reading and writing is truly primary. As one Cuban literacy student wrote: "Thank you for giving me the opportunity to learn to read and write—now, nobody can deceive me and I can learn the truth for myself." [2]. This student learned not only reading and writing, but to accept her own responsibility for determining the meaning and truth of information that she reads.

This project demonstrates the levels and types of literacies that are available, and necessary, to fully decode and understand information in these days of "new" media. I intend to show that *primary*, literacy (reading and writing) is sufficient when the information is presented in only the written word, that *secondary* literacy—the ability to navigate through computer-based presentations—alone is sufficient in many cases, but that the optimum for engaging with new media information involves both primary and secondary literacies. The secondary goal of the project is to increase awareness of the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961, and to illustrate that, with sufficient will of both government and populace, it is possible to dramatically raise the literacy rate of a country in a relatively short time. As was demonstrated in Cuba, increased literacy not only empowered people in their personal lives and careers; it also led to greater political and social involvement and a deeper understanding of the need for solidarity of the population. The more informed a public, the more that public is able to discuss important issues and make the decisions that are critical to the country's—and its people's—future.

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1   www.sliderocket.com
2   A. Keeble (ed.), *In the spirit of wandering teachers: Cuban Literacy Campaign 1961*, (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1961), p. 42

**Artifact**

The artifact opens with slides in a typical all-text Power Point format, with that text being repeated *word for word* by the audio narration. After a transition, the presentation changes to an entirely new format. Color is used, images and movement are shown and, more importantly, there is absolutely no text and the narration supplements the images. From this point on, no text is provided on the slides, although some is included as an integral part of photographs and video. I have carried the concept of *no-text* to an extreme for demonstration purposes. What then follows is an example of "new media". Not only is the information stored and presented digitally and controlled interactively during its display by the viewer, it also consists of images, audio and video—the key elements of new media. The narration no longer repeats on-screen text, but rather discusses the context for the images that are shown, letting viewers focus on the images while listening to the sonic information. The narration also provides any navigation instructions or options. This format continues until it nears the end of the slide presentation.

At the end, the slides return to text-only, pointing out that the viewer has just seen a presentation using *new media*—without any need for reading literacy until the current slide. The text then asks the viewer how he or she knows that the information presented through new media is accurate and true. It points out that without the ability to conduct research—primarily by reading background, source and reference materials—the viewer has no way to determine the validity of the information on the Cuban National Literacy Campaign that was just presented. As Luke writes, "Making meaning from the multiple linguistic, audio, and symbolic visual graphics of hypertext means that the navigator must draw on a metaknowledge of traditional and newly blended genres or representational conventions, cultural and symbolic codes, and linguistically coded and software-driven meanings," and "New media and complex connectivity generate new research questions that require new analytic tools as well as innovative combinations of the old with the new."[3] Despite the many pedagogical benefits of new media, without primary literacy (reading, in particular) information cannot be challenged, questioned, critically analyzed or fully understood. Indeed, without more advanced new media skills than were required to view the slide presentation—sophisticated online search procedures, for example—reading literacy alone is insufficient to deal with today's online research materials.

**On Literacy**

For at least the purposes of this paper, I suggest that there are two key types of literacy: *Primary literacy* is the reading and writing of words, whether printed on paper or displayed on a digital screen. *Secondary literacy* is the ability to use the basic *consuming* skills of new media: the understanding of icons, the ability to navigate between screens, the understanding and use of hypertext, and the ability to launch audio and video. (*Tertiary literacy* would be the ability to *produce* new media; to *en*code rather than *de*code.) Print literacy can be seen as simply a *secondary form* of reading and writing literacy. Print (books, magazines, newspapers) is simply a medium, although we can refer to the ability to use this medium as a *secondary* literacy. Reading and writing words and sentences (paragraphs are structural) is the literacy. Words can be written with a stick in the dirt and the literacy remains the same. Image literacy and sonic literacy, for example, can also be seen as *primary* literacies, in that they require conceptual cognitive skills specific to each of those forms of literacy. The context of those literacies are *secondary*; such as photographic literacy, filmic literacy, or television literacy. The purpose of this analysis is to point out that "new media" may be new, but it is not a *primary* literacy. New media literacy is a skill, a competency that is necessary in contemporary society to read and

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3 C. Luke, "Pedagogy, connectivity, multimodality, and interdisciplinarity", *Reading Research Quarterly*, July/August/September 2003 Vol. 38, No. 3, p. 401.

decode information that is presented in a new form but that is still basically words and sentences: the core of the original primary literacy—reading and writing.

## New Media Literacy

New media literacy does not mean "have more fun with media", nor does it mean "easy to understand, no thinking required." We are a visual society and the reality is that new media largely *increases* our already existing over-dependence on the visual. As Kress says, "What is fundamental is that the screen is the site of the image, and the logic of the image dominates the semiotic organisation of the screen." [4] It is also true that the written word is itself visual, but our "visual" society is becoming more and more focused on images, thanks to movies, television, video games and even the use on computers of icons rather than words. Images can be deceptive. It is very easy to look at something, make an instant—and perhaps erroneous—judgment of what that something is based on our past experience and existing mental paradigms, and then move along to the next image or animation which will trigger off the next stored memory. Words have the potential to be more versatile. It can be easier to mix up words into new, but understandable, combinations in order to express new thoughts, new concepts, new ways of looking at the world. Images, while powerful, express new ideas only when the photographer or artist is capable of conveying a new perspective through the image.

Kellner wrote: "Individuals need to combine the skills of critical media literacy with traditional print literacy and new forms of multiple literacies to access, navigate, and participate in the new multimedia hypertext environments." [5] Where new media shines is in providing the essence, the basic structure, of a concept in a simple and direct manner. But to go deeper, and to fully understand the depth of a new concept or area of knowledge, requires "old media"; the careful reading and analysis of the written word.

## A Comparison of Literacies

Different literacies offer different temporal and spatial advantages and restrictions. [6] With oral literacy, information is imparted in specific real-time at a specific location to an audience of listeners, be it one or many. The audience generally has the opportunity to question the speaker, so that there can be an interactive give-and-take. However, the audience goes away with only its memories; there is no tangible take-away from the information presentation. With writing and print, which can be retained in the form of books indefinitely, time and space are transcended. Books may be read at any time and any place. What is missing is the interactivity, the opportunity to question the person imparting the information. New media offers qualities of both oral and written. It is restricted neither by location nor by time. While there can be real-time interactivity with an online presenter, more frequently that interactivity, if it exists, will be asynchronous, such as through email or forum contact with the creator of the presentation or with other readers of the same presentation. A new media presentation can be linear, like traditional print, but it can also be free-form, allowing the reader to wander through the information in any way he or she chooses.

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4   G. Kress, "What is literacy? in *Literacy in the New Media Age*, London:Routledge (2003), p. 65
5   D. Kellner, "Technological transformation, multiple literacies, and the re-visioning of education", *E-Learning*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2004, p.23
6   For a greater scale view, see H. Innis, *Empire and Communications*. Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield (2007), p. 26. "The concepts of time and space reflect the significance of media to civilization. Media that emphasize time are those durable in character such as parchment, clay and stone. The heavy materials are suited to the development of architecture and sculpture. Media that emphasize space are apt to be less durable and light in character such as papyrus and paper."

Luke discusses vertical and lateral thinking; print being *lateral,* and hypertext media, which allows a reader to go deeper into a subject, being *vertical*.[7] I have chosen to create the Literacy Campaign presentation as a "diagonal" work. I wanted to minimize the reader's options yet still provide some options. My goal is for every reader to follow the same path, with a choice of informative rest stops along the way, as the purpose is to provide upon completion an experience and understanding of the limitations of "new media-only" presentations. The structure of the presentation is also in line with Aufderheide's statement that "media educators insist that the process of learning embody the concepts being taught." [8] The intended end point is for the reader to discover for himself what Ferguson expressed when he stressed Len Masterman's emphasis on the importance of issues of ideology in relation to the study of the media; that "critical thought was and is a way of ensuring that students attempt to weigh things up, to try to decide for themselves, to consider evidence critically."[9] The importance of such critical thought is why this presentation emphasizes, and I hope demonstrates, the need for sophisticated reading and research skills in order to analyze the information presented.

**Conclusion**

I believe I have shown through the vehicle of the artifact that it is possible to create and consume new media without any need for the written word. For the consumer of such an artifact, all that is needed is the basic new media ability to navigate through an on-screen presentation, clicking on icons and choosing whether or not to view or listen to supplemental material in the form of video and audio presentations. However, though it is possible, it is not desirable. Such a literacy results in an incomplete and unquestioning understanding of the subject material presented. Critical thinking requires critical analysis, and it is only through the use of primary literacy—reading and writing—that such analysis can take place. To truly engage in critical thought requires still more sophisticated skills, such as online research literacy—in order to find the information one needs—and sophisticated reading literacy, in order to know what one needs to know and to read and understand what one has found. Successful new media will require all "old media" literacies, all current new media literacies and, undoubtedly, many new literacies yet to come, if they are to truly to enhance the critical understanding of information.

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7   C. Luke, op. cit., p. 401

8   P. Aufderheide, *Media literacy: A report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy*, The Aspen Institute Wye Center, Queenstown, Maryland, December 7-9, 1992, p. 9

9   R. Ferguson, "Media education and the development of critical solidarity," Paper from the Global Interculturalism and the dilemmas of universalism: teaching media after 2000, delivered to the International Congress on Communication and Education in Sao Paulo, May 14, 2000, p. 11

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