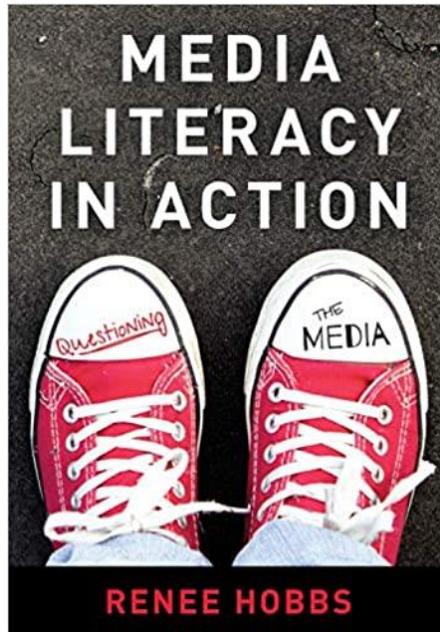


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Review of *Media Literacy in Action: Questioning the Media* by Renee Hobbs

Reviewer: Sarah K. Stice
University of Georgia
Athens, GA



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Overview

In the midst of “widespread polarization and partisan animosity” often attributed to “the media” (Duggan & Smith, 2016), Renee Hobbs’s recent book, *Media Literacy in Action: Questioning the Media*, could not be more timely, relevant, and indispensable to educators. The issues surrounding absentminded consumption of media have been brought to light through many outlets, including the recent Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* (2020) and “Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age” (2021) published by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). For one, *The Social Dilemma* (2020) detailed the invidious ways the monetization of social media sites has led them to become echo chambers that capture users’ attention by sharing the information that they want to hear and see. Social media sites like Facebook and Instagram get paid by advertisers the longer they hold their users’ attention; therefore, these sites use divisive, sensationalized content to attract attention to increase income. This monetized content has led to the perpetuation of conspiracy theories through shares and likes.

In the aftermath of these spiraling conspiracy theories on social media and sensationalism from news media outlets, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) published their “Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age” (2021), which calls students to “explore and engage critically, thoughtfully, and across a wide variety of inclusive texts and tools/modalities” (p. 1). Critical engagement requires educators to ask, “Do learners critically analyze a variety of information and ideas from a variety of sources?” (p. 2) With smartphones in the hands of most of our students and social media shaping our students’ understanding of the world around them, literacy educators play a vital role in teaching students to be critical consumers and intentional creators of content. As schools shift more and more into digital spaces in response to a global pandemic,

and students’ realities become more and more encapsulated by virtual reality, English teachers in particular have an opportunity to raise the next generation of citizens to be conscious and conscientious of the content they create and consume.

Based on more than thirty years working as an educator and researcher on the intersection of media literacy and education, Hobbs brings her expertise to her audience in an expansive yet accessible book with philosophical underpinnings and practical applications of media literacy. The book is divided into four parts: Understanding Media; Judgments about Taste, Quality, and Trust; Media Economics; and Understanding Media. Each chapter begins with clearly defined learning outcomes, follows with explication, is broken up with activities to make the lessons accessible, shares a short biography of an influential scholar or educator who has shaped the field, and ends with a “create to learn” segment. Purchase of the book includes access to a website companion with links, materials, and lessons tied to each chapter.

Summaries of Chapters/Sections

Part I: Understanding media

In a clear and thorough manner, Hobbs lays out the many definitions of media literacy and provides a theoretical framework for media literacy. Next, she explains why media are important, laying the foundation for the purpose of teaching critical media literacy, with a plethora of data about media usage from a variety of studies. She then explains how search engines work, which is an opaque and complicated process that many users take for granted. Her explication of media then moves to how people get the news, and another chapter on the difference between advertising, public relations, and propaganda. She ends with the basics of narrative as

a technique to engage emotions and attract the attention of consumers, especially when used by social media influencers and news networks.

Part II: Judgments about taste, quality, and trust

The next section of the book broadens its scope to consider why people have different tastes in media, who decides what makes media “good,” and how people form judgments about what is trustworthy content and who are trustworthy content creators. She incorporates examples from listening to music, binge-watching on streaming apps, consuming from Hollywood, fact-checking on social media sites, following beauty bloggers, and more.

Part III: Media economics

Similar to *The Social Dilemma* (2020), part III illuminates how media companies make money, including who pays them, the role of censorship, economic policies that impact media, and the illusion of “free” media.

Part IV: Understanding media

Part IV answers common questions like, “Why do people worry about stereotypes?”, “Is my brother addicted to media?”, and “How do people become media literate?” To address the issue of stereotyping, Hobbs shows the function of stereotypes in storytelling—especially in terms of race and gender—and critiques the way these stereotypes can shape our expectations about reality. She calls her readers to take ownership of their social media through self-representation. The chapter on addiction to media addresses the vulnerability of children exposed to violence in video games and gives context to how immersive forms of media are created to activate the reward center of the brain. The concluding chapter gives pointers for how to become media literate, including asking critical questions, connecting digital

literacy to the general definition of literacy as reading and writing practices, and understanding the benefits to public health and global citizenship.

Reflection / Critique

While it is easy to bemoan the fears and failures of social media use, Hobbs takes a surprisingly optimistic approach to critical media literacy. She explains early on that critical media literacy can be based on a deficit view of people as mindless users who consume content uncritically. In contrast, she believes in the inherent intelligence of people who can and will learn to consume media critically if given the right tools and information. The book is detailed, expansive, insightful, and thorough; however, this attention to detail may be its downfall.

The information Hobbs provides is certainly relevant and meaningful, but it is easy to get bogged down in the sheer volume of the book and lose sight of the practical applications. The paperback version is 408 pages, so it is not a short, practical read for educators to pick up over a weekend. Part I alone, an overview of background information to understand what media is and how it works, is over 150 pages long. The intended audience is perhaps those who come to the book with no prior knowledge of the inner workings of social media, and while there is a large audience whom that may reach, educators looking for easily accessible, clearly outlined resources may have to wade a little before they reach their goal.

For educators, the activities in each chapter are particularly beneficial for turning the concepts into lesson plans for the classroom. Based on the premise that learning is situated in real-world application and experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the “Create to Learn” activities provide space for readers to engage with social media in creative ways and to reflect on their creation. Activities include creating a meme, an infographic, a video, a story with a narrative arc, a

review, a memoir, and an interview; and analyzing a news story or comment, search engine results, your personal “media diet,” information sources, stereotypes in images, and dating apps. The website companion is especially useful when paired with the Create to Learn activities in each chapter, as it provides further information, links, spaces to share work with a broader community, and chances to reflect on the contributions of other reader-creators.

The history of education is often neglected in teacher education programs, so Hobbs’s brief introductions to “intellectual grandparents” is an invaluable contribution of the book. Over the course of the book, she introduces influential researchers and educators such as Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist who introduced the ideas of *cultural and social capitals* (among other thing) to human subjects research, and Georgia Herbert Mead, the American sociologist who founded the theory of *symbolic interactionism*. These theorists, philosophers, educators, and academics Hobbs introduces are historical and contemporary, as well as local and international. They have laid the foundation for and expanded our understanding of media literacy in a variety of ways, and she makes their theories and contributions comprehensible in the broad history of literacy.

My favorite part of the book was the *Five Critical Questions* included in each chapter. Hobbs takes the same five critical questions—*who is the author and*

what is the purpose? What techniques are used to attract and hold attention? What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented? How might different people interpret this message? What is omitted?—and applies them to a specific, relevant artifact from the media for each chapter. These questions allow the reader to pause and consider the implications of the chapter just read, as well as provide a model as Hobbs answers the questions herself. I used the five critical questions to teach a unit on critical media literacy in the Digital Tools and Social Media in the English Classroom course offered by the English Education program at the University of Georgia. Together, we looked at a video on TikTok created by a teacher-influencer and critically questioned how the author’s identity as represented on his platform, his narrative techniques, and his use of relatable content might reach different audiences in different ways, including parents, administrators, students, and other teachers. After this whole-class critical analysis, students worked in pairs to pick a different social media post to analyze together. After the lesson, many students expressed that they had never considered the ways influencers intentionally craft their online presence, how that shapes representation on the internet, or how harmful uncritical consumption of media can be on all of us, but especially our students. Hobbs’s questions and lesson format pushed my students to look at social media in a new light, empowering them to be the critical consumers that NCTE (2021) believes all citizens of our democracy should be.

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