

Language and Literature Educators for Fostering Media Literacy in the Nigerian Society

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Abstract

Our society exists in media-saturated environment that cut across print, broadcast, digital and even online platforms, with their various missions and messages. Majority of these media outlets disseminate contents that are not in tandem with our culture, norms, values and acceptable ways of life, thereby exposing our children, adolescents and young adults unnecessarily to unacceptable messages. This necessitates the study of media and media literacy education as avenue to checkmate this rapidly evolving situation. Media literacy connote a set of skills and competencies for accessing, analysing, evaluating, creating, interpreting and understanding the complex messages that are communicated via various media outlets. It occupies a significant portion of the curriculum content of schools in the USA, UK, Australia and Canada, but is lacking in Nigeria. Thus, media studies is not yet a subject in Nigeria, and because use and communication in English depend on content of published media resources, both print and digital, there is therefore the feasibility of teachers and educators in language and literature to project media literacy instructions in the country. These are examined in the paper, with analysis of media literacy and the way forward for Nigeria.

Keywords: Media Literacy, Educators, English, Language, Literature, Nigerian Society

1. Introduction

From time immemorial, the media have being part and parcel of human society. In other words, the existence of man has been associated with the media, though in varying systems. Thus, we live in a society that is saturated with different types, forms, dimensions and perspectives of media, which disseminate information and messages for public consumption. These media do not exist in a vacuum, but have outlets that are supported, funded and managed by individuals, establishments and governments at different levels. Be it print, broadcast or even the sophisticated online environment, these media are always busy with dissemination and communication of information and messages to various categories of individuals in the society. Media literacy projects a set of abilities that enable individuals to access, analyse, create, and respond appropriately to varieties of media messages. Unfortunately, majority of the media messages are not civil, responsible and cultured, but with different, if not clandestine missions to accomplish; majority of which are not in tandem with the ideals, norms, values and acceptable standards of life and behaviour in our society. This raises questions on how to address this situation of unregulated media messages from various outlets, which no doubt has entered deeply into the fabrics of all segments of the Nigerian society.

As used in the context of this paper, fostering media literacy in the Nigerian society has to do with encouraging and promoting the development of media literacy, which is not only desirable, but also worth-doing in our educational system. Fostering also entails projecting, advancing and championing the mission of media literacy education and the benefits it carries, so that our society will not be left out. As Canadian Ministry of Education (2008) and Martens (2010) argue, the media provide rich, varied and contemporary

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resources for students to explore, and allow students to apply media literacy knowledge and skills across subjects; therefore, media literacy could be stimulated and addressed through various subject contents such as mathematics, science and technology, social studies and civics, communication studies, the arts, health and physical education. Be that as it may, language and literature belong to the arts, which are also the core components of communication and language arts. Thus, this paper presents a conceptual analysis of media literacy, rationale for media literacy education in the Nigerian society, and x-rays specifically the feasibility of English language, communication in English and literature-in-English teachers and educators in fostering media literacy in Nigeria.

2. Conceptual Analysis of Media Literacy

Ordinary, literacy is the ability to read and write. However, such description has gone beyond that considering the emergence of the 21st century, that is flooded with many literacies. We have library literacy, information literacy, computer literacy, internet literacy, visual literacy, network literacy, digital literacy, online literacy, cyber literacy, virtual literacy, critical literacy, and the likes. To be familiar with virtually all the literacies require access to one type of information or the other. Thus, giving rise to information literacy as a concept that encompasses all the afore-outlined literacies. Meanwhile, the information content exist in various media formats, such as print, electronic, visual, audio-visual, digital, online and virtual. That is why the media include books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, movies, videos, billboards, recorded music, video games, and everything available via the Internet (Scheibe & Rogow, 2008). These forms of media convey messages; thus, the arrival of media literacy, which is the focus of this paper.

The concept of media literacy has received many definitions and descriptions. This may not be unconnected with the existence of the media over the years, with continuous evolvments. Thus, Jolls and Wilson (2015) traced the development of media literacy and summed up that it has survived over the years, till our present society that is explosively encountering all forms of media outlets and messages. Onumah (2008) posits that media literacy is the ability to review, critique and digest information created and disseminated by media of various kinds, which is a vital skill for young people in many countries. On its part, the National Film and Video Censors Board of Nigeria (2011) sees media literacy as the ability to critically consume and analyze the contents of the media to avoid negative effect of what we see from various media that come our ways on daily basis. To Ende and Udende (2011), the theoretical base of media literacy is rooted in key concepts, thereby giving teachers a common language and a framework for discussion. These include: all media are constructions, audience negotiate meaning in the media, media have commercial implications, media contain ideological and value messages, media have social and political implications, and the likes. The heart of media literacy is informed inquiry and critical thinking about the media, involving awareness, analysis, reflection and action.

According to Elizabeth Thoman, the founder and president of the Center for Media Literacy, who has worked in this field for over twenty years, media literacy is "the ability to interpret and create personal meaning from the hundreds, even thousands of verbal and visual symbols we take in everyday through television, radio, computers, newspapers and magazines, and of course advertising." It is the ability to choose and select, the ability to challenge and question, the ability to be conscious about what is going on around and not be passive and vulnerable (Cooper, 2002). Thus, in the old days, people got most of their information through books. The focus was, therefore, on learning to read print, which came to be referred to as literacy. Now, thanks to cable television, satellite networks and video streaming on the web, viewers are bombarded by a blinding array of verbal and visual messages. Indeed, a simple calculation reveals that the typical teenager who watches four hours of television a day also views over 30,000 commercials a year. This has created an urgent need to become "literate" about the media. It is no longer enough to simply read and write. Students must also become literate in the understanding of media images and messages. Our children must learn how to spot a stereotype, isolate a social cliché, and distinguish facts from propaganda, analysis from banter and important news from coverage (Cooper, 2002). These are championed via media literacy education.

According to Weninger, Li and Williams (2015), media literacy is a pedagogical framework which typically encompasses the development of critical reading and writing as students learn to become ethical members of a participatory culture facilitated by media. As many scholars have argued, media literacy in the 21st century must be seen as a vital component of citizenship. In today's media-saturated world, media literacy is highly relevant. Students need to learn how to view media messages, with a critical and analytical eye, as well as how to interact with media responsibly. By exploring the 'hows' and 'whys' of the media, students develop an increased understanding of the media's unprecedented power to persuade and influence (Canadian Ministry of Education, 2008).

Media literacy empowers people to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of an increasingly wide range of messages using image, language and sound. It is the skillful application of literacy skills to media and technology messages. Media literacy skills help individuals, youth and adults to: develop critical thinking skills; understand how media messages shape our culture and society; identify target marketing strategies; recognize what the media maker wants us to believe or do; name the techniques of persuasion used; recognize bias, spin, misinformation, and lies; discover the parts of the story that are not being told; evaluate media messages based on our own experiences, skills, beliefs, and values; create and distribute our own media messages; and advocate for a changed media system (Media Literacy Project, n.d.). Furthermore, media literacy enables children, adolescents and young adults to interpret the content of media outlets accordingly, and apply appropriate measures and approach in responding to the content.

3. Rationale for Media Literacy Education in the Nigerian Society

Meanwhile, as the influence of the media over all categories of individuals in the society continues at an alarming rate, especially among the children, adolescents and young adults, the need to strategically contend with it becomes imperative. This is mostly accomplished through media literacy education. However, media literacy education is given serious attention and are championed by educators and teachers via the curriculum of primary, secondary and even tertiary institutions in some developed countries such as Canada, England, UK, USA, Australia, among others (Yates, 2001; Hobbs & Frost, 2003; Onumah, 2008; David, 2009; Martens, 2010; Weninger, Li, & Williams, 2015). In addition, Martens (2010) reports that in the USA, many national organizations advance media literacy education and training, such as centre for media literacy, national association for media literacy education (NAMLE), and the action coalition for media education. Also, media literacy education is implemented in after-school programmes, summer camps, religious education programmes, community-based organizations and parental guidelines.

Unfortunately, in the other developing countries in Africa like Nigeria, media literacy education is nowhere to be found in its curriculum, and it is not implemented by teachers and educators. Rather, there are explosions of media messages via various outlets, and these messages are not only consumed by our children, adolescents and young adults, but also they are influencing their behaviour and general life pattern in the society. This reinforces the submission of Strasburger, Wilson and Jordan (2009) that "the evidence of media contribute to child and adolescent behaviour is substantial and can no longer be ignored ... research shows that the media can have an impact on virtually every concern about children and teenagers – early sexuality activity, drug use, aggressive behaviour, obesity, eating disorders, among others".

Meanwhile, in the context of Nigeria, consider the following cases of advertisements, and the possibility of adversely affecting the younger generation. For instance, billboards advertising alcoholic products read 'life is good', 'get absolute satisfaction', 'drinks for the real man' and so on. In various streets and markets, traditional herbal products dealers are over busy with announcements like 'this product will make u very strong and agile', 'this product will make you go as many rounds as possible', 'drink this product and see that your woman will be desiring you more and more', 'this herbal mixture is for washing and setting', and all other sorts of unregulated media messages. Advances in technologies like digital hand-held devices, cell phones, video cameras, podcasts, v-casts, and other associated tools facilitate communication via the Web (Ende & Udende, 2011). What of the social media like face book, 2go, myspace, chatrooms, whatsapp, twitter, linkedIn, blogs, and many others that are accessible to virtually all and sundry, most especially our

children, adolescents and young adults? Most of these categories of individuals, who are mainly students spend substantial part of their time plugged in into video games, MP3 players, movies and the Internet; thus, digital media have become young peoples' preferred method of communication and expression (Centre for Digital Education, n.d.). The nature of messages and types of content shared in these online social outlets may not be correctly articulated and explained. Sadly, they are overwhelmingly all-round; they are something else to imagine, and their description is a herculean task to accomplish. Media literacy education therefore becomes a necessity in our Nigerian society.

Although some factors that constitute media literacy may be found in subjects like English language, civic education, health and physical education, social studies, information and communication technology, and the like, however, they are not categorically positioned and referred to as media literacy. In other words, in Nigeria, the appropriate attention media literacy education deserves is not highlighted and articulated in the above-listed subjects. Not only that, core issues pertaining to media literacy, though found in some of the subjects at primary and secondary schools, but not studied as a subject at those levels, and even at the tertiary level in Nigeria. In addition, no detailed framework has been developed to guide teachers and educators for imparting media literacy in Nigerian students. The only exception is students of media and communication studies, and by extension students of English language, linguistics and literature that usually take some elective courses on media related issues in tertiary institutions. Then what of students in other fields of study? This creates a gap as to how these adolescents and young adults cope with various media outlets that are uninterruptedly dishing out contents and messages in all areas of human endeavour for societal consumption.

4. Fostering Media Literacy by Language and Literature Educators in Nigeria

There are justifications on the feasibility of English language, communication in English and Literature in English contributing meaningfully to the actualization of media literacy education in the country. Among the key objectives of media literacy educational programme are to promote awareness of the impact of media in child and youth development, raise critical questions about the impact of media and technology that will eventually lead to a realization of a balance of meanings, empower children and the young adults to be able to make informed decisions and independently negotiate meanings intelligently with the media content, and further increase the appreciation and passion for the art of film and the creative arts in general in Nigeria (National Film and Video Censors Board of Nigeria, 2011). These objectives are in line with the mission of language and literature in the society.

According to Brown (cited in Martens, 2010), media literacy has traditionally involved the ability to analyse and appreciate respected works of literature, and by extension, to communicate effectively by writing well. But in the past half century, it has come to include the ability to analyse competently and to utilize skillfully print journalism, cinematic productions, radio and television programming, and even computer-mediated information and exchange, including real-time interactive explorations through the Internet (Martens, 2010). The Canadian Ministry of Education (2008) points out that media literacy instruction can be woven in all areas of the curriculum, not only the learning expectations in all the language strands (reading, writing, oral communication, media literacy), but also in other curriculum subject areas. It is in line with this that Aririguzoh (2007) posits that since English language is the official language and the vehicle for the transmission of ideas, meaning and literacy in Nigeria, it therefore has a role to play in fostering media literacy. Thus, as Gruba (2007) notes, English language researchers have many ways to look at the media, such as examining it for its textual features, approaching it through discourse analysis, or seeing it as a site of language contact. In addition, digitized media are also a central part of computer-assisted language learning (Corbel, 2007; Gruba, 2007). As such, the media and English language education appear to have a relationship. Weninger, Li and Williams (2015) add that full attention has been paid to media literacy education in the UK, USA, and Australia where it has been taught as a separate subject or integrated into the teaching of language arts. Since media literacy is not yet a subject in Nigeria, and because English language

is at the core of language arts, there is therefore the need for teachers and educators in English language and communication to project the ideals of media literacy education for the betterment of our society.

Furthermore, there are studies and published works that have justified the imperative of adopting the teaching language and literature as fore-runner for the realization of the objectives of media literacy education in the society. For instance, Hobbs and Frost (2003) investigated a media literacy course that was integrated into a yearlong high school English curriculum. Seven 11th grade English language arts teachers, three of whom attended a weeklong institute on teaching media awareness, selected texts to use in common and developed assignments that included analysis of television shows, news, and political speeches along with classic and contemporary literature. Although based on offline rather than online media literacy, the study found that explicit media literacy instruction increased both traditional literacy skills, such as reading comprehension and writing, and more specific media-related skills, including identification of techniques various media use to influence audiences.

According to Weninger, Li and Williams (2015), in Singapore, the English language syllabus of 2010 places greater stress on critical consumption and production of multi-modal texts and introduces viewing and representing in addition to speaking, listening, reading and writing. This is an acknowledgement of the importance of media literacy in the new syllabus of Singapore. The significance and timeliness of fostering media literacy in Singapore was further recognized by the recent forming of the Media Literacy Council whose aim is to lead public education on media literacy. Given this policy and educational climate, a project that aims to foster media literacy in schools through the teaching of English language is momentous in the country (Weninger, Li & Williams, 2015).

Furthermore, since media literacy appears as an innovative issue in line with the realities of explosion of media messages, English language and literature educators could address it via the teaching and learning process. This is where the diffusion of innovation theory comes in for possible adoption and application in the process of fostering media literacy in Nigeria. Diffusion of innovation theory is a meta-theory, and Everett M. Rogers (1995) is the best-acclaimed known scholar in the area of diffusion research, due to the fact that his book, *Diffusion of Innovations*, (4th edition) is the most often cited work dealing with innovations (Yates, 2001). Diffusion is the process by which an innovation is adopted by members of a certain community. There are four factors that influence the adoption of an innovation: the innovation itself, the communication channels used to spread information about the innovation, time, and the nature of the society to whom it is introduced (Rogers, 1995). Therefore, for language and literature educators to foster and project media literacy education in Nigeria, they should be ready to address the factors that influence the adoption and implementation of an innovation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Media literacy is a necessity in this era of sophisticated information sources and systems, coupled with various avenues for dissemination of messages and contents to people. Nigeria needs to wake up and give media literacy education the attention it deserves. For now, based on the afore-stated justifications, there is need for English language, communication in English and Literature in English educators to develop interest in media literacy, and explore its possible integration in the teaching and learning process of English language and communication in English in our educational institutions. To a greater extent, the feasibility of this can be ascertained, based on the fact that the teaching and learning process of English language and communication in English is dependent on media sources, including print, electronic, and even online publications. Media literacy education could be made a general studies course, or could form a substantial content of language and literature courses for all students in colleges of education, polytechnics, universities and allied tertiary institutions.

Educational planners in Nigeria are also expected to rise up to the challenge of assessing and adapting international best practices in teaching and learning. Media studies and media literacy education could be considered and possibly piloted as a subject in Nigerian secondary schools. Even some states of the

federation could rise up to the challenge of doing something unique like test-running media literacy education as a subject to ascertain its impact on the society. This will invariably be emulated by other states, if successfully planned and implemented, with intended results and significance felt in the society.

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