

# Frank 2021 SCASL Summer Institute Keynote

SCASL Keynote June 22 2021

What do we want students to know about the media?

Thank you for the introduction and the opportunity to be with you all again.

These are TROUBLING and unprecedented times. Our democracy is threatened. Trust in the media is at all time lows. And the numbers of people who believe and spread misinformation and conspiracies is frightening. All of this tells me: OUR JOB is more important than ever and we have much work still do with students and teachers.

I can't help but recall what one teacher told me last year: Frank, she said, "my students don't care if it's fake news." And if that is a prevailing attitude, then we'd better address their apathy as well.

I'd like to begin with a quote: "To be a functioning adult in a mediated society, an individual must be able to discern different forms of media and know how to ask basic questions about everything they see, read or hear."

Elizabeth Thoman, founder Center for Media Literacy

And THIS observation from communicator scholar Marshall McLuhan: the fish swimming in the ocean is oblivious to its environment...the water (an apt metaphor for students who swim in an ocean of media)

One thing I think we can all agree on: the last four years coupled with the ongoing pandemic—have brought critical thinking and media literacy to the forefront. 1

A new word INFODEMIC was coined recently to describe the

deluge of information much of it inaccurate, unreliable and untrustworthy which spreads like wildfire. And THIS is an opportunity for those of us actively engaged in fighting disinformation and the like.

No doubt, you've read about efforts by social media companies to combat disinformation and conspiracy theories. I am here to declare: we cannot depend on them to police the content. There's just too much of it posted everyday. This makes our job even more important, critical and relevant.

Hopefully NOW more people are paying attention to how important it is that we provide students with the skills they need to navigate an increasingly challenging AND changing media landscape.

As you know, I am a tireless promoter and practitioner of media literacy. And it has received a lot more attention in the past few years.

Some of you may recall that in February and March of LAST year, (before the pandemic) I keynoted the regional meetings and spoke at length about media literacy. At that time, one of my goals was to help YOU differentiate between information literacy and media literacy...

because there continues to be much confusion about what they mean.

At the heart of media literacy is **critical inquiry**– 2

A “media literate” person knows which questions to ask about the media they come in contact with...questions like:

- who is the author/producer/creator of a message?
- what techniques are they using to make a message attractive or believable?
- who or what is omitted from a message and why?
- how people, different from me, might understand the same message differently
- What values are promoted and which ones are not?

AND- who benefits from the message?

[BTW, these questions come in a handy downloadable poster you can locate online]

To begin, I want to pay tribute to every one of you here today: the past school year has been a challenge to say the least. Let us acknowledge that it WAS difficult, and yet, we all found ways to continue the important work of reading, information literacy and more. So to you all I say: BRAVO. You are my heroes.

In the American Education System we teach students how to read, write, listen and speak but RARELY (outside of ART) do we teach them how to VIEW. That is a glowing omission that should not only be recognized but also rectified.

I recently tweeted: it should NOT solely be the responsibility of librarians to teach media and information literacy...it is going to take every teacher in every discipline...to teach these important skills. (do your teachers have those skills?)Until that happens, we will continue to see many misinformed and media ILLTERATE people.

The rise in the use of the Internet as a source has many benefits but also has revealed a huge problem. Let me elaborate:

In 2016– a study by Stanford University of 8 thousand middle, high school and college students found that many lacked the skills of “digital evaluation”:

- many failed to identify bias in an online post;
- many could not distinguish between ads and news on another website,
- many could not tell the difference between opinion and news
- and many believed a photo was actual deformed daisies caused by an accident from a Japanese nuclear power plant.

Stanford researchers called students ability to read and understand everything on line as DISMAL.

[An excellent book that you might want to acquire is entitled WHY LEARN HISTORY WHEN ITS ALREADY ON YOUR PHONE,, written by Sam Wineburg, the lead Stanford researcher.]

A 2019 followup study of 3 thousand HS students found that half believed a grainy Facebook video clip of poll workers stuffing ballots into bins was evidence of American voter fraud...even though the video was actually from Russia. *More than 96 percent failed 4*

*to recognize that a climate change denial group was connected to the fossil fuel industry.*

Calling the results TROUBLING, researchers added: **The inability of students to gauge the credibility and accuracy of online information poses a serious threat to “the vitality of American democracy.”**

That inability is echoed here in the Palmetto State where evaluators told the State Department of Education that middle and high school students needed more instruction in identifying bias and the credibility of information—because they failed that part of the SC Ready assessment. That fact alone is an open door for you as library media specialists to continue working with teachers on this particular standard.

Thomas Jefferson famously said—and I paraphrase here—the health of a democracy depends on an informed electorate. I’m here today to ask: what happens when the majority are ill-informed and media illiterate?

Ladies and gentlemen: journalism is under fire. Cries of fake news have resonated with many— causing trust in media to take a nose dive. That’s problematic. Legitimate journalism organizations have now created PR campaigns to REBUILD trust lost in recent years. It really helps if students understand the role of journalism, including the First Amendment, censorship, bias and more.

All of you watching/listening to me today ARE already 5 “media

literate"—and you got that way by osmosis... but not all of our students are. Formal education in the US does not recognize or require media literacy.

It was not always this way: in 1999, I co-authored a commentary in Education Week which reported on my STUDY of all 50 state's teaching standards—all had "elements of media literacy" in their standards for ELA, Social Studies and Health.

But what happened since? Something called Common Core.

I have previously written about how Common Core wiped out those gains. (that was ANOTHER ed week commentary) I know SC is not a Common Core state, but honestly much of what is in our ELA standards was borrowed and IS a part of our standards.

When the SC House education committee recently voted DOWN a "media literacy" measure, like you, I was disappointed but not deterred. The bill would have required the state department of education to create an advisory/task force to investigate media literacy. I advocated that SCASL have a seat at the table. But our own state department opposed the bill, claiming that media literacy is already taught. (I would respectfully disagree)

I have concluded: we don't need the legislature OR 6 the state department of education to continue the important and relevant work of teaching students how to think critically and act responsibly when it comes to media and technology

You all are the ORIGINAL media literacy educators. Many of you have learned new and important skills because lets face it, times have changed. We've taught students HOW to use the computer.

But hardly anyone today teaches them HOW to watch TV, video or movies. (These are known as CRITICAL VIEWING SKILLS) And it is the moving image that they are exposed to increasingly more

than print.

Our teaching standards do not reflect that we are in a world that is increasingly NOT print-centric. Instagram, Tik Tok, YouTube, influencers—this is their COMMUNICATION world and it is primarily dependent on the moving image.

So perhaps instead of calling it media literacy education , we should call it SCREEN EDUCATION or MOVING IMAGE education.

If you agree with me, perhaps we as educators should demand and lobby for professional development AND teaching standards that begin to reflect the fact that we need to prepare students NOW for HOW to read the media.

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If you've attended any of my workshops, then you know that I approach teaching media literacy by treating media as TEXTS—designed to be read, analyzed, interpreted, deconstructed AND reconstructed.

And I am fond of using examples: like TV commercials, the cover of a magazine, or even a film clip—things that we all have easy access to.

Many of you know that I teach media literacy, but what you may not know is that I started out ON television, back in 1977 as a weatherman on the local ABC station here in Columbia. I was excited because I was right out of college, my first job and I was working IN THE MEDIA. Then it struck me: I have to stand in front of that camera during the 11oclock news—Monday-Friday—and do 4 minutes—without cue cards or a teleprompter or a chromakey. To say I was apprehensive would be an understatement. Yet I did it. I learned how important it is to be prepared (to do the weather), to do your homework and be an effective on-screen communicator.

I titled this keynote: what do we want students to know about

the media? I want to stop for a minute and ask you TO SHARE VIA THE CHAT three things YOU WANT students to know about the media.

I will start the clock right now (wait a minute)

NOW: I'm going to ask my facilitator to read some of your responses. (read those)8

Allow me to share three of mine:

First. I want students to know that media is everywhere. It's powerful and almost inescapable.

2nd. I want students to know that the media is *influential*. It sets agendas by what it reports (and what it does not) and in many ways, tells us what to think, feel, eat, drink AND PURCHASE.

3rd. I would want students to know that most media exist to make money.

Now I want to challenge each of you to think about concrete ways you could be teaching students about the three ways you just named.

Let me go back to my story about working in TV news right after college. In addition to "doing the weather" I was also a daytime reporter.

And after coming in from reporting, I would sometimes call in and dictate my story to the Associated Press. An AP editor would transcribe my story and after a few minutes, the story that I had dictated would come over the teletype machine. I was really impressed—because other TV and radio stations and newspapers (that subscribed to the AP) would be receiving the story that I had called in. I began to really appreciate the role of the AP news service.

Now skip ahead to today: where each one of us can post "news" on social media and it can literally go around the world in a few seconds.9

Sometimes we take for granted the fact that today's technology

allows pictures and sound to be seen seconds later...virtually LIVE.

I recall in 1969, watching man step on the Moon for the first time. There I was sitting in my family living room—watching it LIVE on TV.

And I was thinking: how DID they get a TV signal from the Moon to the Earth.. 238 thousand miles.

Think about all of the important news events that we've experienced via TV: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Challenger explosion, the fall of the Twin Towers on 9-11, the Capitol insurrection, just to name a few. Today, we don't blink an eye when we see LIVE satellite images from space or some hotspot on Earth.

[Another resource I want to recommend here is Capstone Press's CAPTURED TELEVISION series— each book explores in-depth how a famous event (the Civil Rights movement, The fall of the Berlin Wall, the Kennedy-Nixon debate) was dependent on television to be there and bring us the story.

None of these things happen without a journalist or photographer—someone on scene to document and deliver the news to us. But how many of our students really understand or appreciate the role of journalism?

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I'm biased because I worked in TV News and I experienced first hand the power of news to inform and educate. That's why I am pleased that there are "news literacy" efforts today designed to educate young people about what it's like to report the news. Some of you are already enrolled in The News Literacy Project's CHECKOLOGY initiative.

So speaking of news, I am guessing that many of our students NOW get their news from social media. At least they're staying informed right?



Well as most of us already know, there are drawbacks to social media. Most of the “news’ they read may not have a source, other than a friend sent it to them. In addition, most of it might only be headlines or click bait. And would they be able to recognize bias if they had to?

Do our students ALSO realize that their online habits are TRACKED, and an algorithmic formula feeds back to them what they are interested in? So to me the media literacy education of today needs to also teach them about the lack of privacy when they are online.

Their TV viewing habits are also ripe for spies. I would want today’s students to know that the cable which delivers TV PROGRAMS INTO THEIR HOMES, ALSO SENDS SIGNALS ABOUT VIEWING HABITS BACK OUT TO ADVERTISERS AND MARKETERS.<sup>11</sup>

There is much in the news recently that social media companies need to do more to ferret out conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and disinformation—and Congress has held several hearings holding these companies feet to the fire.

Recently, social media companies began to take down posts by Holocaust deniers—who used various platforms to promote their lies. My question is: what took them so long?

So let me repeat: we cannot depend on social media to police content—they don’t have the capacity especially when millions of new posts, containing false information, are published everyday.

That fact alone makes critical thinking about media more important than ever.

As you all are aware, the media—especially social media—has been a huge topic in the news. And it makes headlines when someone posts something that gets attention. And nothing has received more attention recently than disinformation about

Covid-19. And it is the legitimate news media's job to debunk the junk and tell readers what is true and what is not.

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Do your students know about the "fact checkers" ? I'm assuming all listening to me today know about them.

There are more than a dozen organizations out there now whose job it is to research claims and to verify their authenticity.

The oldest of them is FACTCHECK.org run by the non partisan Annenberg Public Policy Center.

Factcheck was started by former CNN reporter Brooks Jackson. He observed that CNN was accepting and broadcasting political ads –some of which made outrageous claims. And he challenged his news network to spend time telling viewers the truth.

The New York Times newspaper for one started devoting space to what it called AD WATCHES—which basically deconstructed the images sounds and claims made in these political ads. Today they are simply called Factchecks and they've made their way onto television.

Here in Columbia for example, the CBS affiliate, owned by TEGNA, regularly airs a segment called VERIFY. And you can find all of their segments on Youtube.

So in my opinion, all of our students—kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade need to have opportunities to STUDY media messages—everything from news stories, to magazine covers, to commercials, to editorial cartoons, to propaganda messages, tv and movie promos and clips and much more.

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And it would be critically important that all teachers be comfortable using these media as they seek to engage students in the media analysis process. But all of us have not been trained, so many are not comfortable.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not reference another facet of media literacy... that is AS IMPORTANT AS analyzing media...and that is MAKING MEDIA.

Media literacy education encourages us as educators to provide all students with the opportunities to make media.

The skills acquired (or example) when making media productions have already been recognized and recommended by the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills and the National Digital Writing Project.

Yes many of them already know how to take pictures and video with their mobile devices...They are the NEW photojournalists, broadcasters and movie makers even though they've received no formal training in the rules.

And after they've created something, we all know they want their productions seen... So that exposure could be anything from a bulletin board, to a newsletter, to a morning news show, to a post on social media. 14

So I leave you now with the same question I started  
What do we want students to know about the media?  
I hope I have challenged you to think about some NEW WAYS you might engage them in the months and year ahead.

As always, I welcome your comments/questions. I welcome the opportunity to work with you and your teachers to bring everyone up to speed on REAL MEDIA LITERACY.

Thank you. G-d bless you. Stay well and in touch.