Reading and writing are two activities specific to human beings: animals do not read or write. From the beginning of human civilization until today, the concept of literacy has always been changing together with the ideas of culture and of the learned human with his or her social necessities of education, school goals and politics, and with the changes of communication languages and systems. Literacy must be examined from two points of view: the development of the human communication systems and, as a consequence, the emerging necessity to improve competencies in reading and writing texts. The latter view takes into consideration the role that school education plays today and considers its present difficulties and its mission in handing down knowledge and culture. In this essay, I first outline the reasons for the gap between school and mass media that several theories have highlighted and the features of the consequent education philosophies based on the idea of contrast and fight. Then, I argue that media literacy can be the foundation on which it is possible to build a positive and fruitful relationship between media culture and school education. Going through the history of the concept of literacy and taking into consideration the media literacy theories will show how media literacy practices not only function for education and cultural growth but also have important significance in human growth.
parallel school exercised great appeal because it evoked the idea of media consumption as a site for learning and, at the same time, the lack of connection between school and the media, exactly as the parallel lines are (Fulchignoni, 1972; Genovesi, 1981; Porcher, 1974; Postman, 1985). As Porcher (1974) noted, the parallel school is made up of a series of channels thanks to which pupils (and the whole audience) can get, outside school, news, knowledge, a sort of education in different fields. The instruments of the parallel school are the ones of mass communication, that is mass media: press, comics, radio, cinema and, above all, television. These new education channels, not controlled by teachers, are often used by pupils. Any opinion you can express towards them, the pedagogic problem they propose cannot be ignored. We want to know whether the school and the parallel school will continue to ignore each other, to behave as if they were enemies or they will form an alliance. In any case, the problem cannot be ignored by teachers. (p. 5)

The gap between school education and media culture is exactly the starting point of this essay because we are convinced of the persistence of this idea if not in literature, at least as a naïve theory. For this reason, it is important to understand the causes of such a deep dichotomy, which can be traced back to four contradictions:

1. **Fatigue versus amusement.** School has always been characterized by a long and demanding training period of learning and improving one’s knowledge, which would otherwise be impossible. On the other hand, media culture, mostly based on images, does not include teaching and is characterized by amusements, loss of meaning, and frivolity. In other words, we could oppose the educational austerity of school and the cultural hedonism of media.

2. **The primacy of images.** If, on the one hand, school culture is based on presenting elaborate concepts and abstractions through more or less formal speeches, then the language of images is by nature unable to obey and follow the cause and effect law or to communicate abstractions since it manages only to arrange images and frames in sequence, one after the other. The paratactic style of audiovisual communication was seen, before the theory of brainframes (de Kerckhove, 1991), as one of the possible causes of the change, if not the reduction, of the cognitive capabilities of young people.

3. **High culture versus popular culture.** While school is officially a repository of humane and scientific studies, fields which are well-established, “classic,” and meant for a limited circle of people, mass media is popularized as an “easy” culture addressed to everybody, which lacks high-level contents and is considered a divertissement d’'ilotes (for more about the contrast between high culture and pop culture, see Barthes, 1957; Eco, 1964; Hall & Whannel, 1964).

4. **Relativism versus control.** School culture refers mainly to the transmission of fixed knowledge, recognized in scientific subjects controlled by the Academy. It aims to hand down a well-established, validated, certain knowledge in an organic and structured way. Conversely, media culture is a fast-changing, dynamic, and relative culture where every opinion and position has validity.

It is not surprising that the history of media pedagogy has been a history of conflict when drawing on the aforementioned conception of the relation between school and media culture. There are two different historically and ideologically situated antithetical versions: the “right-wing” and the “left-wing” perspectives. The former is represented by Neil Postman (1979) in his book, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*. He put forward a homeostatic theory of the educational process with two assumptions: first, the mass media are children’s “first curriculum” in terms of both the amount of time spent and the efficacy of handing down and inculcating messages; second, this “first curriculum” has caused a reduction of young people’s logical abstractive and linguistic competences. If this is true, school should play the role of a “cultural thermostat” since it has always aimed at revealing the main tendencies in culture and opposing them with any educational philosophy. In this way, the teleological vision of pedagogy, according to which education has to direct its efforts to reach a certain anthropologic ideal, is denied. On the contrary, the aim of education lies in preserving culture and the society where it is put into effect.

Against the culture of entertainment spread by electronic media, Postman (1979) wrote that the traditional school system should be preserved and appreciated because of its values of continuity, socialization experience, social order, hierarchy, deferred satisfaction, and individuality. As for school subjects, Postman insisted on a return to the literary tradition of the humanities, underlining the importance of correct spelling, lexical enrichment, rhetoric, and argumentative abilities. The gap between this curriculum and the media curriculum is plain and clear, and the author is fully aware of it (Postman, 1979).

Unlike Porcher (1974), who hoped that the future of school to be “a meeting between the parallel lines” that could be realized thanks to the choice of audiovisual aids and of other learning technologies, Postman (1979) did not want a compromise between the two cultures of school and mass media, which he considered intrinsically and inevitably antithetical. The introduction of media into schools is surely to be hoped, not as mere learning aids, but as textual samples to analyze. American proponents of media education propose the creation of a school subject—similar to media literacy—which has media as the subject matter of its teaching. It would aim at helping children and adolescents to understand the world of mass media and its technologies, the speed and spread of information, and the media’s influence on thoughts, social behaviors, and values. Thus, the main goal is media ecology, which counteracts their influences through a rational and critical meditation on themselves. Inevitably, according to Postman’s point of view, a metaphor for the use of media in school is the creation of an Indian reservation, where it is possible to hide and regulate the media so that it cannot influence education in general, but can be easily controlled. In this way, media is not a precious gift to preserve, but an enemy to keep in check.

In contrast to such a conservative framework, neo-Marxist inspired media pedagogy has a more progressive slant. The Frankfurt School, as embodied in the work of Horkheimer and Adorno (1969), interpreted mass media as a cultural industry, an enormous system aimed at creating and imposing role models, needs, and new outlooks. Its principal characteristics were the mass production of cultural objects whose aesthetic value was lost by addressing an individual whose originality is unknown and occupying people’s amusement and recreation spaces. The general effect was one of mass alienation together with other alienation that people suffered because of the devaluation of human production. From this perspective, mass media were seen as a means able to rouse a dialectic comparison and a cultural opposition among several class forces.
Confirmed by Althusser (1970), this theory considered mass media as a superstructural system that, by popularizing models and values, established a space for the conservation of the system and thus, a sort of ideology in the Marxist meaning of the word. So, against mass media, the cultural elite developed an attitude of low opinion and regarded the media as a “mass culture,” fostering a middle-class prejudice toward them. Critics accused the bourgeoisie of using the mass media for the social control of the working class.

From this perspective, some educators have developed what Valeri and Betti (1976) called “alternative information.” This alternative perspective was presented as enhancing global education by fostering “young people’s critical thinking education,” that is, to help them uncover the mechanisms that work in the system with manipulative and repressive aims. So it served as means to guide them by a precise critical analysis of messages, to define the function stated by media inside a classist system” (Valeri & Betti, 1976, p. 33). It is for this reason that Valeri and Betti criticized the commonly used way of introducing media into the school, which they define as a “bleaching operation,” a narrow form of critical analysis that dwells only upon contents such as violence, immorality, vulgarity, and horror, or at the most, advertising and propaganda. In their opinions, such an approach to education becomes a sterile activity that sinks into political indifference because denouncing mass media culture only strengthens all the other messages and the overall culture of the cultural industry. The teachers who have these attitudes may be partly responsible for a behavior of “political indifference or conformism or proper conservative will, all attitudes that, anyway, are precious supports for the middle-class system” (Valeri & Betti, 1976, pp. 44–45).

From a critical perspective, education aimed at teaching aesthetics—the philosophical sense of educating to recognize and contemplate beauty—loses significance by being “bourgeois” and misleading as to the social-political needs of today. On the contrary, education that involves students in the production of media messages is stimulating because, according to social dialectic, people’s approval of the techniques for creating media products (audiovisual, radio, and written products), and the organizational methods of networks is a meaningful occasion to test opposition to the oligarchic control of mass media; in addition, such work may renew the meaning of both technique and manual ability, overcoming the simplicity of learning by doing, which is pursued by the supporters of active teaching.

The diverse perspectives of Postman (1979) and Valeri and Betti (1976) exemplified the two diverse forms of tension in the field. Some educators continue to view the media as useless, even antithetical, to the proper processes and functions of education in handing down values and the cultural heritage of humanity. Other educators insist that a more active role must be inculcated in students to enable them to culturally oppose the distortion of information carried out by media for political reasons and to understand the roots of cultural and political alienation.

In Great Britain, where media education has been developing for many years, this tension is also evident. Halloran and Jones (1992) introduced the concept of the inoculation approach, the most traditional approach towards media education. It is traditional both from a chronological perspective, since it traces back to the 1930s and the early 1960s in this geographical context, and from the modern media literacy theorists’ points of view, who consider it completely outdated (Buckingham, 2003), all the more so because it draws inspiration from a media theory—so-called bullet theory of media influence (Lasswell, 1938), a theoretical perspective that has lost credibility.

From this point of view, media education has had to play the role of a vaccine that serves to inoculate the population to immunize them from the harmful effects of the media. Indeed, in England, the first and longest phase in media education’s development, lasting from the early 1930s to the early 1960s, was mainly a defensive and paternalistic movement whose function was to introduce popular forms into the classroom only in order to dismiss them as commercial, manipulative, and derivative—the culture of the machine—in comparison with more traditional “high” cultural forms. Media education was, thus, in its earliest manifestation, education against the media. Its function to encourage pupils to develop discrimination, fine judgment, and taste by grasping the basic differences between the timeless values of authentic “high” culture (in which teachers were themselves initiated) and the debased, anticultural values of largely commercial mass media (Masterman, 1997).

The inoculation approach is seen by English scholars as the first and already outdated phase of the historical evolution of media literacy education. But by looking around the world, it is clear that these tensions cannot be regarded as completely outdated. For instance, unlike other fields of pedagogic science that deal with a value in itself (the human being, the child, the family), media pedagogy, although it has gotten rid of some prejudices towards the mass media, continues to present a sort of opposition towards them. Educators instinctively continue to critically assess the impact and consequences of media upon children’s growth and education.

Even beyond this positive and “critical” function of the tension between different ideas about media education, in the last 20 years media educators throughout Europe, the Americas, and Asia have been looking for an encounter instead of a clash. Even though parallel lines travel close to each other and never meet, educators and scholars have done their best to make them cross and cover part of the way together. But there is still an unresolved question: What is the conceptual cornerstone on which we can foster the meeting between school and media culture? One of the most interesting attempts to answer this question has emerged within the worldwide movement of media education among those who have embraced the idea of expanding the concept of literacy.

Pedagogical Background for the Concept of Literacy

The English word literacy means the ability to read and write, and corresponds to the Italian word alfabetizzazione, the French alphabétisation, the Spanish alfabetización, and the German Alphabetisierung. In western countries of the 19th century, a literate person was able to read and write his or her first name and surname. Today, according to UNESCO, literacy means being able to understand and write down a short composition about everyday life events. Moreover, the concept of functional literacy, though it has been criticized, has broadened the definition of literacy, linking the learning of language comprehension and expression abilities to the solution of concrete problems that humans face in everyday life, that range from family and social experiences to concerns of life and health (Faure, 1972). The concept of literacy cannot be considered static: Throughout the years, it has experienced a progressive redefinition, which is necessary due to changing social-cultural conditions of humankind and the understanding of these changes. This redefinition of the concept of literacy has gone towards a gradual

Above all, Freire’s (1971) studies gave prominence to the social and political meaning of literacy. Drawing from his experience with poor people in Brazil, Freire combined the words literacy, conscientization, and liberation of the oppressed, so that the acquisition of reading and writing abilities was connected to giving meaning to reality and becoming aware of one’s role in society. According to Freire, process of conscientization means the passage from a situation of intransitivity (stagnation and refusal to change), to transitivity, which cultivates the will to change the established power relations in society, and by expropriation not only of all possessions but also of personal dignity and the role in community. In this way, literacy has a liberatory direction because it aims to provide people with the proper cognitive instruments to become aware of their situations and to make change.

Beyond these expanded interpretations of literacy for social change, we have to recognize the great conceptual importance which characterizes the use of the word literacy, as it is popularly used to mean basic education in any field, often as a reaction to some level of ignorance in the population. Considering the diffusion and the plural use of the word literacy in the American education, Considine (2000) listed, with a good deal of irony, different literacies that are commonly referred to in contemporary society: health literacy, cultural literacy (an approach that reinforces the dominant ideology of Western civilization), multicultural literacy, media literacy, information literacy, cyberliteracy, and even Amish literacy.

From One Literacy to Multiple Literacies

If we dwell upon the constitutive link between literacy and language, we can easily realize that the posttypographic world we live in has a multiplicity of languages, all simultaneously used, which change the concept of literacy. Watts Pailliøtet and Mosenthal (2000) moved from the assumption that “multiple forms of representation inherent in mass media texts profoundly impact thinking processes, educational products, and the ways we represent and perceive the world,” to suggest the development of “new definitions of the theory of literacy, practice, study, and policy” (pp. xxi–xxii). For media literacy educators, the concept of literacy benefits from the meaning of a metaphor on one side and the power of an umbrella concept on the other.

Using the term media literacy to show the connections between the study of language and the study of communication technologies has caused confusion because there are considerable differences between print literacy and the skills required to comprehend a visual media text, particularly in the area of decoding and comprehension (Desmond, 1977). Meyrowitz (1998) shared this opinion, arguing that “understanding visual symbols has nothing to do with literacy: [. . . the first one] has no linguistic symbols to decode, no letters to recognize, no grammatical rules to master” (p. 103). Moreover, Desmond (1997) claimed the word literacy should be accepted in a wide, metaphorical sense bearing in mind its explicative power and its ability to take on a multiplicity of functions connected to language. It is for this reason that Tyner (1998) regarded literacy as an umbrella concept that can help us to understand “the wide range of real and perceived literacy needs for contemporary times” and for this reason, she introduces multiliteracies, a word which is intentionally plural” (pp. 62–63).

The concept of multiliteracies has had a great success because it goes well with the theory of multiple intelligences, developed by Howard Gardner (1983). The theory of multiple intelligences was appreciated all over the world for its ability to explain and promote differences in cognitive styles. Under the brim of this umbrella concept, the diverse forms of literacy required by contemporary culture and new technology can be seen as strictly connected, not as fragments of a literacy once united, but as a whole series of distinct and, at the same time, interrelated and overlapping competencies.

Tyner (1998) distinguished between tool literacies and literacies of representation. Some of the multiliteracies are connected to specific technologies and specific representational forms and structures of mass media; this implies that there may be teachable concepts both in terms of reading (analysis/understanding) and writing (production/expression). Thus, the multiliteracies theory has the merit of putting these learning subjects in relationships potentially to create a common conceptual foundation that avoids regarding them as distinct agglomerates of knowledge and abilities. Hobbs (2006) proposed a taxonomy that links, in operational terms, the different intervening fields of media literacy, visual literacy, information literacy, and critical literacy. Each of these expanded perspectives on literacy can encourage educators to link linguistic learning to the diverse other communication competencies required for today’s youth.

Defining Media Competence

Recent studies have begun to provide scientific evidence to favor teaching literacy through the communicative arts. I refer to the transferability of learned abilities from one field to the other which is always invoked but never proved. In other words, one of the justifications of media literacy is that the abilities of analyzing messages and communicating with media instruments, once learned by studying popular texts, can be applied directly to different contexts. For instance, literacy skills from one genre, such as print, could be applied to other genres of audiovisual media, television, or film. In reality, the transferability of literacy knowledge had always been either taken for granted or supported depending on teachers’ and educators’ experiences. Only recently, some experimental research has tested this principle empirically and rigorously, finding that when the analysis of media texts is included in a traditional class, students’ reading comprehension and writing skills improve (Hobbs & Frost, 1999; 2003).

These kinds of studies, still at the onset, are particularly interesting for several reasons. One reason is that such studies highlight the relations between media literacy and other school subjects, demonstrating the validity of media literacy curricula to school teachers and administrators. In this way media literacy becomes not only an activity that motivates students, but it is a formative process that can really teach something to students, so it strengthens basic abilities that are transferable. Moreover, these studies give an empirical confirmation to the idea of multiliteracies, demonstrating the transferability of abilities and of some analysis categories (genre, point of view, message target, etc.). It is shown that reading and writing abilities in different media formats is founded on a series of common skills and that traditional literacy, strictly connected to the reading and writing of the alphabetic code, can be seen in continuity with the other literacies of representation that Tyner (1998) described.
When conceptualizing *media competence*, as media literacy is commonly identified in Europe, three families of concepts are evident: understanding, critical viewing, and producing messages (Felini, 2004). Each of these is linked to specific typologies of educational activities that promote their development.

**Understanding**

This includes the ability to understand media messages, the mass communication system, and the logics of production and reception. This understanding is linked not only to the intratextual (semiological) dimension but also to the political and economics contexts in which media communication takes shape. This series of skills is connected above all to the cognitive dimension and develops through educational activities which involve textual analysis and gaining knowledge about media systems.

**Critical viewing**

This includes the ability to meditate on our own method of media consumption and that of others. This series of skills can be strengthened using educational methodologies that encourage reflection on media use habits, uses and motivations, content choices and behaviors.

**Media production**

This includes the ability to create messages in different media formats (press, video, radio, comics, hypertexts, Web pages) to express opinions and take part in the community life. This series of skills is linked both to the cognitive dimension but also to operating abilities and cooperation. A typical educational activity is a media production workshop where collaborative work includes brainstorming, message design, development, and performance.

Another sound definition of literacy skills is the one proposed by the Aspen Institute’s National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, which pointed out the following four areas: decode, evaluate, analyze, and communicate (Auferheide, 1997).

To sum up, we can underline how reflections about literacy made in the last decade fostered an expansion that took into account (a) how human communication is a phenomenon that is organic and diversified at the same time because it both respects constant and transferable laws and it takes place through a multiplicity of forms and instruments; and (b) how it is possible to blend rich literary tradition and Western culture into the symbolic and emotional nature of the new media forms, in order to overcome the separation between life in and out of school that today sets up students for failure.

As shown in Fig. 3.1, the expansion of the concept of literacy has developed into three distinct axes. First, new language teaching methods have been added to the traditional alphabetic dimension that has taken into consideration the new tools, instruments and several different representational forms (x-axis). Second, other and more complex abilities such as message analysis, research, evaluation, and production have been added to reading and writing skills, skills that have been important since ancient times (y-axis). Lastly, visual, audiovisual, digital, and hypertextual forms—belonging both to high culture and mass culture—have been added to written text, which previously was the focus of literacy because visual texts were presumed to be easy to understand (z-axis). Today, the space for literacy has been widening, influencing all the possible channels of human communication.

**Critical thinking education**

According to most literature about media education, teaching literacy through the media is a useful practice to develop critical
thinking. Even if Piette (1996) revealed the sometimes confused notion of critical thinking contained in media literacy curricula, teaching literacy through the media improves critical thinking, both in the sense of convergent thinking (including analyzing the message content, finding underlying values, deconstructing an argument) and in the sense of divergent thinking (such as thinking differently compared to the masses and expressing original opinions). Critical thinking education is also linked to moral education because expressing a positive or negative judgment about a media message implies the reference to a personal and valid belief; that is, in the very end, a moral value.

Democracy and civic participation

The link among the literacy, democracy, and wealth of a nation has been perfectly expressed by many thinkers and educators since the modern age. Participation in community life is not possible today if we are not able to read what happens in the world and to write our ideas not only through the press but also through other kinds of media. Two assumptions about media production activities in the classroom support the development of youth civic participation. First, educators must prevent adolescents from simply copying the most banal formats of mass media texts only because they are more fashionable than traditional school reports. Secondly, to develop civic participation, adolescents’ media productions must have a real audience, not only a familial and school audience. Partnerships with local media can give pupils the possibility of being listened to by their whole community. Listening to young people is a good exercise for the community too.

Health education

Health teachers, particularly in the United States, are among the most active media literacy teachers. Media messages often emphasize body image and social and personal behaviors that could impair or improve healthy decision making. Analyzing these kinds of messages may provide youth with protective and preparatory skills (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2001).

Development of gender identity

Media literacy can be useful to introduce the theme of gender identities into children’s and adolescents’ classes; for example, demystifying the stereotypes about gender roles, exploring different tastes boys and girls may have about media consumption (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999), or simulating different roles and identities through chat rooms.

Aesthetic education

Ugliness is invading our world, and we are not able yet to recognize what is beautiful and what is ugly. Sometimes, media are responsible for this situation. Teaching the media is an occasion to develop an understanding of aesthetics, not only the psychological perception of colors, proportions, manipulation, as the Anglo-Saxon tradition states (Messaris, 1994), but developing the sense of beauty according to the philosophical European tradition (Gennari, 1994).

The perspective outlined so far allow us to define two important themes. The first theme is how studies about the history of literacy introduced the idea of restricted literacy (Roggero, 1999). For different reasons depending on the historical period, a more or less numerous part of the population did not receive a basic education. Restricted literacy implies a split competency. One who learned how to read and write could not be thought to be able to read and write everything because his or her ability was limited to certain types of texts. For example, during the 18th century Germany and England, spelling books which educated people how to read were printed in with Gothic type, but not in Roman type, of which books of the high learned were printed. People could learn how to read the printed characters but not the handwritten ones, which prevented them from understanding common documents such as leases, receipts, letters, or wills, which in fact were handwritten. As a consequence, people were neither fully illiterate nor literate but had gradations and levels of literacy that enabled them to function more or less competently in society (Graff, 1987).

Beyond the good intentions of 19th-century popular school policies, today a similar phenomenon occurs: People can be literate, but in a restricted sense. The multiplicity of textual typologies, linguistic codes, and transmission channels can prevent people from developing their literacy skills in a comprehensive way and so they cling only to traditional processes and texts that they understand. In this case, it can be useful to highlight briefly some priorities:

- Promoting the spread of the concept of multiliteracies, making sure that it cannot remain patrimony only to scholars but that it is spread to school administrators and teachers
- Experimenting with taxonomies of educational standards and indicators regarding the whole spectrum of multiliteracies. This aim is not easy to reach—recent and reliable international research, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2003) of OECD have widened the spectrum of reading skills, but not of textual typologies, remaining linked to written alphabetic text
- Developing literacy curricula based on the principle of multiliteracies for the whole span of compulsory school attendance
- Assuming that media literacy programs are not only the benefit for a limited number of students attending high-class schools, but they should be placed at all schools’ and students’ disposal. Without community-wide implementation, the risk is a “literacy divide” depending on socioeconomic class

One dangerous possibility must be considered: Literacy education through the media arts could appear to be just a routine set of skills linked to reading and writing in several media formats or, even worse, only a pretext to make getting in contact with texts of different genres pleasant for young people. We have to remember that media are the culture of the 21st century. Today, this makes media literacy a very important element of what has been named “liberal education” (Maritain, 1943; Smith, 2002), the general education that leads us into the cultural production of civilization. This education opportunity must be available to everyone. Media literacy belongs to the field of liberal education for three reasons: (a) It teaches the process of semiotic analysis (and in this sense it is an education that makes learning anything else easier); (b) it enables learners to get to know the content of contemporary culture and even the production, spread, and fruition that characterize it (all in all, it is another way of studying history, sociology, or anthropology of the group we
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CONCLUSION

The world around us continues to unfold and a new future is going to open its doors, even though it remains nearly completely unknown to adults. Who will explain it to you, generations? I would like to end this essay with this question because, among the most obscure and confused elements that mark the gap between generations, it appears that youth seem to benefit in a far more immediate way from technologies and media than the people who are older do. Like Robinson Crusoe, a lot of youth manage quite well to dominate and tame the strangeness of their realities, creating meaningful island habitats without much need of the (more or less) experienced guides who may introduce them to the obscure secrets of the contemporary world, media, and communication technologies, too. To conclude, media literacy education is to be seen as a little like a bet that adults have with children and adolescents (and maybe even themselves) about the best ways to thrive in a culture saturated with mass media technologies and messages. As island guides to an unknowable future, we are colearners with students; as a result, we cannot not teach these things to our students. They are the strange newcomers of our world, and we should be ready to teach them the best ways to thrive in a culture saturated with mass media technologies and messages.

(Translation by Ines Sala, MA, and revision by the author)

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