

Not all that we watch are real: **Young People and Media Literacy in Malaysia**

- N.V. Prasad, Shanthi Balraj,
Mohd. Zain Dollah, Sarata a/p Balaya

Abstract: The main aim of this study was to examine young people's media literacy practices by introducing a media literacy intervention programme comprising both media analysis and media production activities on issues concerning them such as stress and friendship. In the present new media world, it is essential for the young people to develop a sense of media awareness and activism to facilitate social learning in relation to the surrounding world. In building a productive learning culture among the students, media literacy is a necessary intervention in developing critical understandings, creative abilities, and active participations. This paper presents the findings of focus group discussions with young people aged 16 in Malaysia regarding issues such as their media consumption practices, engagement with media messages and critical inquiry patterns in terms of their understanding on the role of video production. The results of the study present a cause for concern, optimism and the need for inculcating active media participation of the young people's voices on the issues concerning them.

Keywords: Media literacy, Media making, Critical inquiry, Young people, Stress & Friendship.

Introduction: Malaysia in the past few decades has experienced a flooding of various forms of new media. An authoritative media control and ownership of content is slowly eroding; the growth of new media and the Internet in Malaysia today has opened new alternative spaces for discussion, entertainment and social interaction especially among the young people but not much has been studied on the capacities of young people to analyse, interpret, evaluate and produce media works. The media are, without any doubt, a highly significant part of contemporary young people lives in Malaysia. Therefore, there is a clear case for exploring the status of media literacy among young people in Malaysia, as at present there is no formal learning of media education in school settings. The complexities surrounding media texts, media audiences and media institutions demand critical media literacy skills among young people in Malaysia. Therefore, there is a great need for introducing media literacy projects so that media literacy skills can be developed among young people to meet the challenges in the present days and to enable young people to participate in decision-making process.

This paper reports the outcomes of a project that has aimed to inspire ordinary young people to develop their media literacy skills through critical media analysis and media creation work. Young people in this project, plan, design and upload short video productions online on the issues related to them such as stress and friendship. The project provides young people a means of expression and allows them to communicate to far broader audiences than they might reach in their classrooms. Selected young people in Penang, Malaysia participated in a series of media literacy workshops and used the visual medium as a tool for expression and reflection. The workshops heard their voices on old and new media, the ways they engaged with different programmes and saw their messages in video related to the issues of stress and friendship. This paper gives an account of young people's reading of television texts in Malaysia, their views on video production experience and the ways the project developed creative learning cultures among young people in selected Malaysian schools.

Project Background: The project has aimed to give voice to young people to explore through the visual media the issues concerning them such as stress and friendship. It is dedicated to the nurturing of young people as critical and creative video makers who will use video as a medium to express their ideas on issues concerning them. This project draws inspiration from Gauntlett's work titled 'Video Critical' and absorbs central ideas and procedures stated in the study. Aiming to develop critical media analysis and media creation skills among young people in Malaysia, this project besides teaching media literacy concepts, also includes a video production project in the study. The various perspectives discussed in Gauntlett's work were useful in guiding the project both procedurally and theoretically.

This project was carried out in four selected secondary schools in Penang, Malaysia. Young people aged 16 from four urban secondary schools in Penang, Malaysia participated in this research project. Each school nominated 20 students to participate in this project, thus a total of around 80 young people participated in the media literacy workshops conducted separately in each school. Selection of students was done on a voluntary basis with the assistance of class teachers. In selecting the students, care was taken to represent students from various races, gender and class structures of the Malaysian society.

The project consists of 2 phases that includes a research phase and a production phase. The research phase looks into young people's perception and practices in relation to media. Focus group interviews were conducted to understand students' views on television programmes with particular emphasis on issues related to stress & friendship, their media consumption patterns and their views on the influence of television and its representation of various issues related to them. In addition, towards the end of the workshop students shared their views on video production experience. During the production phase, students

produced eight short videos of around four to five minutes duration about the topic of stress and friendship with groups of nine or ten students, over the course of few weekly sessions. This paper directs attention to the research phase; it presents the findings that emerged out of focus group discussions, which provides an understanding of their reading of television texts in Malaysia and their views on video production experience.

Focus on Developing Media Literacy among Young People: Media Literacy is a movement that helps children, teenagers and adults cope with today's inescapable and overwhelming media environment. However, in the process of learning and adapting media information, the focus falls on children and young people whom are often considered vulnerable by most scholars. Developed during the 1980s and 1990s in response to public concern about media violence and commercialism, the movement is centered in schools but also encompasses homes, religious and civic organizations and other institutions.

Media literacy continues to be defined in a variety of ways as new media and technologies constantly emerge, are updated and essentially upgraded. Some definitions see media literacy "as a set of perspectives that we actively use to interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter in the mass media"(Potter) (19), while others stress the need for the convergence of media literacy and information literacy to form "internet literacy...the ability to access, understand, critique and create information and communication content online"(Livingstone) (110). The definition of literacy is broadening to include new media and technologies and new ways of interacting with, understanding and interpreting text and information. In today's society, information is no longer confined to print and paper. Therefore, in short, media literacy is commonly defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and effectively communicate in a variety of media forms"(Considine) (472). It is an undeniable fact that the media and information is being constructed according to their (media owner) preference. The Center for Media Literacy in Los Angeles further claims that media literacy can produce less vulnerable children and adults. Thus, in short, people who understand the motivations and production techniques of media are less likely to adopt destructive behaviors that are depicted in the media. But how many of the audience especially younger generation would be able to understand the motivations and production techniques used behind those constructed media information is still remains questionable. Media literacy encourages listeners and viewers to ask key questions about the content they encounter. The basic premise is that media messages are depictions of reality, not reality itself. The truth is media depict some, but not necessarily from all possible perspectives related to the issue. Some aspects of reality are likely to be de-emphasized (Potter). For example, young people who watch news might not ask beyond what is stated and they tend to agree with everything they see and hear. TV advertisers are well aware that media shape attitudes about products and

services. They pay handsomely for advertising opportunities and skillfully manipulate words and images to draw attention to their products. Painfully but obvious, many advertisements are aimed at children and young people, who are virtually defenseless in the face of techniques such as exaggerated, false comparisons, and misinformation. Therefore, it is crucial to say that, young people must learn to critically analyze and evaluate media messages and to construct media messages of their own. In short, they must become media literate to safely sail through this media saturated world.

As noticed by Livingstone, nowadays young people's lives are dominated by media where an average child grows up with television, DVD player, radio, CD players, video games, mobile phones, computers, Internet, I pods, and Tabs. "It looks like they are a technology savvy, however, they do not necessarily possess the ethics, the intellectual skills to critically analyze and evaluate the information they encounter in their daily life" (Buckingham) (15). Young people cannot be categorized as truly critical consumers of the mass media until they have enough skills, experience and real world knowledge for them to interpret the meaning of images and enable their voices to be heard (Buckingham). Potter expresses his greatest concern that if young people do not develop a good conception of the media and their messages then they may develop misunderstandings and misperceptions about their world. He further argues that "media is leaving young people to faulty beliefs; either they will accept the beliefs presented to them in the media or they will construct their own beliefs which at the end of the day, it may be faulty (10). Therefore, there is a great need for developing media literacy among young people today, to meet the challenges and opportunities offered by different types of media and its content. Hobbs argues that despite significant growth in media, it would be great if media literacy becomes a part of the education system (2-3) at least as a part of extra curricular activity if not as a subject in the regular curriculum.

Office of Communications (Ofcom) in its strategy document has outlined seven objectives (Dr. Aphra Kerr). It argues that all teachers should have the competence to encourage pupils to talk about television, video and film viewing experiences and reflect upon their preferences, interpretations and responses. Meanwhile, schools and cultural organizations should collaborate to ensure that all young people have regular opportunities to see a wide range of moving image media. In addition, it states that every child should have access to moving image software in the classroom and at least one experience of practical video production during the school year. It is believed that exposing children to moving image software and video production process would make them understand better on how media works in today's society. According to Kathleen Tyner, as students practice questioning the media and other information, they begin to internally question information every time it appears in the environment, without prompting from the teacher. It is believed that media literacy not only develops critical thinking but

creativity as well. Consequently, media literacy also emphasizes 'creative production', in formats including school newspapers, public service announcements, narrative films, music videos, film scripts, advertising, song lyrics, magazine articles, web sites and more.

However, awareness on media literacy among young people is still lacking and it is quite disappointing. Painfully obvious, no schools or intuitions in Malaysia have ever implemented such concept in education system. Most scholars claimed that, media literacy could start at any place by any parties (Centre for Media Literacy). For example, parents should set limits on the use of media at home, teach media literacy skills at home or school by talking with the children about stereotypes and hidden messages in television programs, video and computer games, commercials and music. Often, teachers and parents should express their opinion on the construction of media content with and in front of the children. However, sad to say, media literacy knowledge is what we are lacking off at schools or even at home. It looks like media literacy is not a great concern after all. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), "children are influenced by media – they learn by observing, imitating, and making behaviors their own" (1224). The influence of media content on children has been the subject of increased attention among parents, educators, scholars and professionals. And, nobody can deny that media influence on children and young people has been steadily increasing, as new and more sophisticated types of media have been developed and are more easily available to them. Most of the research relating to new media focuses on how children and young people access media, but there is relatively little on how they interpret the media content and what they do with it when they find it. Likewise, there is very little research on how young people create media, new or old, in their everyday lives. And, do children become more media literate simply as a result of greater exposure to the media? Thus, we could say, greater exposure to media content will not necessarily make a person become more media literate. To sum up, it is important to have a balance of access, understanding and creation of media content in order to be a media literate person in this media saturated world.

Findings and Discussion on Young People's Reading of Television Texts and their Views on Video Production Experience: Discussing the major benefits of the media literacy project, most of them said they have learnt how a video is made, to operate the camera, shooting, editing, directing, acting and most importantly how to analyze a video or a media content. Overall, most participants enjoyed sketching their own storyboards, making a video of their own and they were glad to see other people see and comment on their videos. When asked, generally most participants claimed that they like to watch television drama or even cartoons which are more entertaining, fun and appealing for young people. Rucira, a participant expanded by saying:

I could relate myself with those characters that I am watching on television. Most of the time, I watch television only for

entertainment purposes. Therefore, I hardly watch documentaries, educational programmes, local news or even international news because they seem to be boring for me.

For younger generation, it seems the element of 'realism' is not a big issue. However, after the workshop, she realized that the society is becoming saturated with media and therefore it is important for them to become critical consumers and producers of media. As Nuvair describes:

For me, meeting my parent's high expectation is really stressful. During stress situations, I would seek for a friend's comfort as for me, friendship is very important in my life or I will watch television for entertainment purpose. Television drama often depicted teenager's life having ups and downs, therefore, I could relate myself to the characters and that helps to ease my stress and served as a source of entertainment when my friends are not around.

However, Prakash, a participant argues that mostly television either shows the bad side or portrays everything in a positive manner while the other side of the world is being neglected. It seems there is no balance of presentation in their content. Prakash claims that media people should take note of young people's lives today and what actually they are going through. In his opinion, there is lack of realistic content as there is only misconception and exaggeration in media content. A few other participants were like " we do not care whether media is created by somebody under economical pressure or even the news has political and economical influence, for us, as long as we know what is happening around us is more than enough." These comments certainly highlight the importance of creating media awareness among young people. When a news article (*Titled: Dr. Mahathir: Have a "sense of shame" for job not well done published in Star Online on 10th November 2011*) was given to the participants, majority of them read, understand it as the way it has been written and did not question beyond what is stated there. If an adult has read the same news article, most probably he/she would have thought in terms of political, economical and social context of the messages. In short, most of the participants seem to accept whatever they are watching in television as the way media is presenting to them. Only one participant, who read the news article could argue from the perceptive of political, economic, social, and technology because she had the prior experience of visiting Japan. Therefore, she could relate the news article to her experiences. During the media literacy workshop, students also watched some short video clips named; meal is ready, grey's anatomy, forest gump and so forth. In addition, they too watched some advertisements and short video clips on the theme of stress and friendship. Most participants could engage with videos emotionally but none could interpret the content beyond what is stated. They seem to interpret the messages directly without questioning why, how and what. In short, real world knowledge and experience are required for young people to develop their media literacy skills. Overall, most participants agree that media literacy or media education is useful and they strongly

believe that it plays a vital role in their lives.

On the whole, participants expressed that the production experience has increased their understanding of television production process, developed a sense of respect for producers and also developed their sense of appreciation towards the media. As expressed by Alanna:

I always wanted to join mass communication programme. Therefore this media literacy and video production workshop would be a starting point for me. I understood that one has to put a lot of thought, proper planning, practice and discipline to produce a video. It is not that easy as it seems. However, after this production experience, now at home, I could see and realize the difference in watching television before and now. My perception of watching television certainly changed as I can differentiate between the good and bad and whether it is fake or real.

According to Calvin, he likes 'photography' but he regrets that he does not know how to use the camera in a proper way. However after this media literacy workshop, he claims that, he learnt about production guidelines and the related terminology. Now whenever he watches television, he is able to identify the camera positions and angles used by the respective directors. He admits that this media literacy training provided him an exposure to production process and its content. Even, Aiman agrees with Calvin saying that this media literacy workshop gives him a new experience and it helped him to get new perspectives about media. He further claims that for young people like him, media literacy intervention programmes such as this are relevant for them before they leave their school environment and enter the real world that is more challenging. Most participants expressed that if they are given a chance to involve in media literacy production workshop again, they would definitely love to do it in spite of realizing that video production requires a lot of effort and time. However, a few participants answered negatively like "I think I will not do it again, because it is tiring and my interest is in other field". Most importantly, majority of the participants feel that media content has the power to change people's mindset. It certainly could bring an impact among the audiences. Without any hesitation, they expressed that media is the fastest and the easiest way to communicate about the importance of any issue to the people. Hence, they feel that young people should learn about media literacy at school level.

Conclusion: On the whole, the analysis of young people's views reveals that the level of media literacy level among young people in Malaysia is not up to the desired levels. Therefore, it is necessary to develop young people's media literacy skills through media literacy projects at secondary school level. Analysis of their media consumption patterns points out that young people are currently using the television and the web more for entertainment than for acquiring knowledge and information. Moreover, the analysis also reveals that young people have tremendous faith in the visual medium and they believe that they can influence change in the mindsets of fellow young people through their

messages. Likewise, it has been demonstrated in the production phase of the study where young people have demonstrated that the media production work enables them to voice their ideas, concerns and possible solutions they have about the issues concerning them. Therefore, we believe that introducing media literacy training in the secondary schools in Malaysia will be a useful intervention programme to develop and nurture a community of young people who are more media literate.

References :

- American Academy of Pediatrics. *Media Violence Pediatrics*. 108. 2001: 1222–1226. Web. 20 Sept. 2012.
- Buckingham, David. *Media Literacy – A Global Strategy for Development: Youth Media Literacy*. UNESCO Publications. 2002. Print.
- *Media Literacy – Literacy, Learning, and Contemporary Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2003. Print.
- *The Media Literacy of Children and Young People*. London: University of London. 2004. Print.
- “Center for Media Literacy.” <http://www.medialit.org>, n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2012.
- Considine, David., Horton, Julie., Moorman, Gary. Teaching and Reading the Millennial Generation Through Media Literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Volume 52, Number 6. Mac, 2009: 471–481. Print.
- Dr. Aphra Kerr. *Media Literacy in Northern Ireland*. Northern Ireland: Centre for Media Research, University of Ulster. n.d. Web. 20 Sept. 2012.
- Firestone, Charles. *National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy*. Washington DC: Aspen Institute. 1994. Print.
- Gauntlett, David. *Video Critical: Children, the Environment and Media Power*, John Libbey Media. Luton. 1996. Print.
- Hobbs, Renee. “Media Literacy in the Classroom”. *Newsweek*. http://school.newsweek.com/pages/extra_media_literacy.htm. 2001. Web: 2–3. 10 Oct. 2012.
- Livingstone, Sonia. *Young People and New Media*. Thousand Oaks: Sage. 2002. Print.
- *Internet Literacy: Young People's Negotiation of New Online*. “Media Literacy.” <http://www.limitv.org/literacy.htm>, n.d. Web. 20 Sept. 2012. *Opportunities. In T. McPherson (Ed.), Digital Youth, innovation, and the Unexpected*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 2008: 110. Print.
- Potter, W. James. *Media Literacy*. SAGE Publications Inc. 2011: 10–19. Print.
- Tyner, Kathleen. *Literacy in a Digital World: Teaching and Learning in the Age of Information*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum. 1998: 199. Print.

