



## PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

# Roots of Digital Literacy

### MONITA BELL

Thank you for tuning into this special episode of *The Mind Online*, a podcast of Teaching Tolerance, which is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. I'm Monita Bell, your host, and I'm excited for you to hear the wisdom in what's to come.

You can't talk digital literacy without the Center for Media Literacy, a pioneer in the field of media literacy with more than 30 years in the game. In this special episode, listen as Tessa Jolls, president and CEO of the Center, describes the early years of the field and how it has evolved since then. "Media literacy is foundational to almost every aspect of learning," she says. You'll hear how she breaks down the core concepts of media literacy: Whether it's deconstructing old media or constructing new media, those core concepts remain the same. She gives great advice for approaching media literacy instruction with inquiry and a clear pedagogy in mind. Take note!

Without further ado, here's Tessa Jolls.

### TESSA JOLLS

I'm Tessa Jolls, and I'm president of the Center for Media Literacy. Our organization is headquartered out of Los Angeles, and our founder Elizabeth Thoman really helped launch the media literacy field in the United States. So we've continued our work through the years, and we have certainly seen lots of change in the media environment. But the quest for providing media literacy education continues, and certainly we see the need to institutionalize media literacy in the United States and also globally.

Media literacy was a response, in many ways, to the content of media, especially here in the United States. Oftentimes people were unhappy with the content of media, particularly that directed toward children. And it could be that people felt the content was too violent; it was too sexually explicit. There also was, of course, commercialization of media, especially for children. And so all of these concerns translated into demand on the part of parents and some educators to start helping children be able to critically think about media content so that they could evaluate. They could self-select the kind of media that hopefully, you know, would be healthy for them long term. And this isn't an issue that's confined to children, but the focus has typically been on children because certainly that's where the education system focuses. And also there were health concerns that different health agencies provided funding to address.

So those early years were often focused on content. And through the years we began to see that, really, media literacy should be about instilling process skills, helping children and adults discern about media and to learn to filter and even have an internalized filtering system so that when they come across any

information any time, they would be able to make—hopefully—wiser choices about the content and about their own decisions in regards to the content that they come across. And so the media certainly has changed through the years because in the past it was mass media, and now we're really looking at the internet, social media; we're looking at all kinds of different forms of media that are very powerful and that also provide all of us with more of a voice.

Digital literacy is confined to digital spaces, so there are a lot of similarities. But media literacy is broader in the sense that we look at all forms of media. So the logo that may be on a shirt or on a purse—those kinds of media messages also are something that we need to think critically about and realize what media message is being sent to us. And in addition, certainly, the internet, social media, all of the forms of media are something that we need to learn to both deconstruct or take apart and critically analyze. But we also need to think critically about what we *construct* and what we produce. So media literacy really applies across the board.

I think Winston Churchill said it best. We need to fear fear itself. I think that there's a lot of fear, and some of that comes with new media and with people being unfamiliar with certain forms of media. And certainly the whole social media landscape has given voice to millions and millions of people who previously really didn't have much of a voice. And so the traditional kinds of filtering—those are disappearing because now all of us are media producers, and all of us really have a responsibility as well as an opportunity in terms of the kinds of media messages that we produce and that we send and share with others. So there's a huge power shift in terms of how media is used, how it's shared, how it's understood. And we need an education system that can really keep up with the changes in the media landscape.

The most important guiding principle is that media literacy is about critical analysis. We are not about giving the answers, about telling people how to think or how to believe or how to behave. So media literacy is not a directive exercise. Instead, we're really focused on the notion that we need to be skeptical, we need to be asking questions; and that media are constructed, that they're constructed with a purpose; that there are techniques that are used to attract attention with media; that different people are going to understand the media very differently from each other; and also that media is framed in certain ways that always contain bias. And so these really important notions about media apply whether we're deconstructing or constructing media.

And then there's also the whole aspect of, "Well, all right, given that we need to understand how media operate as a global symbolic system, what do we do about it? How do we make choices? How do we get active? How do we express ourselves?" And so we really see media literacy as a combination of freeing our minds and thinking independently, thinking critically for ourselves and then seeing how we can express ourselves, how we can participate, how we can work together to effect change or to work toward certain solutions or address certain issues.

I think the most important thing—and this can be a challenge for teachers—is really to learn about the pedagogy of media literacy because media literacy does involve specific pedagogy. It involves methodologies that can be different from traditional teaching, and I say that because we really encourage teachers to be "guides on the side" rather than a "sage on the stage." And what that means is that, again, we are all about that process of inquiry, about helping teachers learn to conduct and help their students

conduct a process of inquiry so that, again, students get these process skills that enable them to be lifelong learners.

It's always tempting to be the person with the answers. And when you're in a situation where you're helping students explore and discover, it's a very different process than when you are disseminating content or sharing content. And so we really want to make sure that teachers emphasize those process skills. In other words, there's the analogy of "You can give someone fish, or you can teach them to fish," and we want to be teaching people how to fish. And teachers need to teach people how to fish rather than just *giving* them the fish. So there's a big difference in the teaching styles, and it takes practice. It's not something that's automatic.

I think that having a framework for media literacy education is essential. And so familiarity with the core concepts of media literacy—these are kind of guidelines that help people understand how media work. And we have to start with that foundation because, in a sense, we have the laws of gravity, you know, through Newton: the idea that what goes up must come down. And we have similar laws or concepts that govern how media operate as a system. And so we want people to know what these laws are, and we want them to understand that media does operate systematically. And so by understanding that, then we are much better equipped to learn how to deal with media ourselves and use it effectively and productively for ourselves.

I think we're at a critical juncture because, certainly, media literacy has gained some attention with all of the ... with all of the concern about disinformation, misinformation and so on. And so it's so important *now* that we help provide this new way of educating young people and also adults so that we can all be prepared to take on these new responsibilities that we have as media producers and as people who can share our message all over the globe. And I would also add that media literacy is foundational to almost every aspect of learning, whether it's learning to become a digital citizen—you need media literacy. Whether it's learning to process health information and make some health decisions, media literacy is very essential for that. Whether it's learning to teach in a way that's really compatible with 21<sup>st</sup>-century technology. Again, media literacy comes in. So we're looking at a very foundational skill that needs to be widely taught, and right now, unfortunately, it's scarcely taught.

What gives me hope is the increased voice, the increased participation. We talk about having democracy, about encouraging democracy, and definitely part of democracy is giving people voice. And so we now have that opportunity, and really we have the huge challenge of kind of learning how to deal with it. And, thankfully, I believe that we're making a lot of strides in terms of thinking about how to deal with it and even recognizing that it's an issue.

#### **MONITA BELL**

You just heard from Tessa Jolls, president and CEO of the Center for Media Literacy, which is one of the pioneers of the media literacy field.

Thank you for listening to this special episode of *The Mind Online*, a podcast of Teaching Tolerance, which is a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center. I'm your host, Monita Bell, senior editor for Teaching Tolerance. This podcast was inspired by Teaching Tolerance's Digital Literacy Framework, which offers

seven key areas in which students need support developing digital and civic literacy skills, and features lessons for kindergarten through 12th-grade classrooms. Each lesson is designed in a way that can be used by educators with little to no technology in their classrooms. The Digital Literacy Framework and all its related resources—including a series of student-friendly videos, a professional development webinar and a PD module—can be found online at [tolerance.org/diglit](https://tolerance.org/diglit). That's [tolerance.org/D-I-G-L-I-T](https://tolerance.org/D-I-G-L-I-T).

Our producer is Jasmin López, and our production supervisor is Kate Shuster. If you like what you've heard, rate, review and subscribe! And share with your colleagues and friends.