

# Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's media literacy! [Carnival of Journalism]

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Are You Media Literate?

As a journalist working in a university I very aware of the power of the idea of media literacy. I am sure that to exploit the social potential of new media and the knowledge economy, that we need more of it. But I now fear it has become a reflex piece of policy rhetoric to replace real thinking about how people use information.

[This post is part of an international collaborative blogging project called [Carnival of Journalism](#)]

As someone who called my [book about journalism's future 'SuperMedia'](#) I am in no position to criticise optimists who hope that a combination of technology and education can deliver real world outcomes. But I have always cautioned against facile hopes of positive media effects.

For example, take [the myth of digital natives](#). It disguises real obstacles and unevenness in the adoption of new technologies. Yes, people like [Dan Tapscott](#) are right to say that we have a new generation who live in a digitally-infused environment. Yes, they are developing new habits and skills. But how well they do at that depends on old-fashioned factors such as education, class, family and wealth. Injecting a bit of media literacy into their lives won't overcome all those obstacles. You certainly can't leave it

to Google or Facebook to do it for us.

Media literacy can't plug all the gaps. If you reduce consumer protection and citizen rights' then it will fail. If educators do not look hard at what really delivers enhanced creativity, then it will fail. If civil society or the state withdraws from education for mediation, then it will be left to the markets.

Markets have never delivered fairly on personal development or education. Just because they are now online markets does not mean they will do so for digital media literacy. As my colleague Professor Sonia Livingstone put it to me, "Inequality not empowerment is the inevitable outcome".

This is not a counsel of despair or pessimism. It's certainly not a call to nationalise media literacy in some kind of Soviet style 5 year plan. I agree with the Knight Foundation that we should "integrate digital and media literacy as critical elements for education at all levels through collaboration among federal, state, and local education officials." But if we do so then it has to be more than programming night schools and lap tops in elementary classrooms.

I think media literacy will be really boosted when two things happen. Firstly, budgets for media literacy are devolved to the lowest level, bringing the benefits of digital inclusion right down to the grass roots. Secondly, it will be when government and companies design their services to reward those who become media literate with real power and real material advantage. That means more media literacy for our leaders, not just the people.

[this post is part of the Carnival of Journalism, where an international group of media/academic bloggers take one subject and give their take on it – you can see the other articles [here](#)]

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