Background

As the relationship of health and media becomes more clearly understood, support for media literacy education have been growing from prestigious organizations such as the the Centers for Disease Control, the Aspen Institute, the Newseum, and the MacArthur Foundation. There are promising signs that media literacy is a viable intervention strategy for positively impacting knowledge, attitudes and behaviors, and The Consortium for Media Literacy is a pioneer in this field.

In the only major longitudinal study of middle school students on media literacy and health produced in the United States* – supported through the Consortium for Media Literacy, among others – media literacy was shown to be an effective health intervention strategy that can be feasibly integrated into schools as an approach to improving critical analysis of media and media consumption. As research is addressed with other health subjects, the strength of confidence in media literacy is bound to continue.

The media literacy field is a global movement, a field of research and study, and a pedagogy. As the 2014 Aspen Institute report entitled “Learners at the Center of a Networked World” stated, “Technology has been the driving force behind dramatic advances occurring in every sector of society. Industry after industry has seen traditional business models challenged as customers connect directly with suppliers or one another and the line blurs between consumers and creators. The digital revolution has turned passive viewers into active users.” It is this technology revolution that underpins the needed focus on media literacy, since media literacy provides the foundational skills necessary to acquire, contextualize and apply content knowledge, insuring that media users are able to effectively represent themselves in a global media culture.

Just having critical media literacy skills is not enough, however. Youth and adults alike must know how to apply these process skills to specific media messages. Whether it's smoking cessation, nutrition, violence prevention, addiction, sexuality, or gender identity, the media plays a critical role in determining how each health issue is represented – and how individuals represent themselves in this life-or-death arena for action.

Advertising is pervasive across the internet, on television, on radio and on billboards, and now, with targeted data, advertisers have more reach than ever. This is not a new phenomena. To take one example, the Kaiser Family Foundation reported in March 2007, in a report called Food for Thought: Television Food Advertising to Children in the United States (and this research was supported by a subsequent study in June 2007 by the Federal Trade Commission) that children aged 2-11 were exposed to an average of 18,000 paid ads. This, in the face of previously researched data that shows that the more time children spent watching television, the less likely they were to engage in physical activity (DuRant, Baranowski, Johnson & Thompson, 1994). This in the face of the fact that one of the biggest health problems in Los Angeles Unified School District today is obesity – and keep in mind that LAUSD educates 20% of children in the State of California.

These are complex problems requiring systemic solutions and individual citizen activism. Teachers and library-media specialists from across the country have called for media illiteracy as an urgent – and largely unmet – priority among educators in schools today. Employers, among other advocacy groups, have also indicated their support for providing 21st Century Skills such as media literacy, and today, legislators from across the U.S. have introduced bills calling for media literacy education, with the State of Washington being the first to pass a comprehensive law.

The Consortium for Media Literacy provides a range of services to support media literacy as a cognitive intervention for health, addressing topics such as violence prevention, nutrition, body image, sexuality, geriatrics, and other vital issues. We welcome your participation in bringing media literacy education to the table in improving citizen's health.