

MELL Project Symposium 2006

Draft Tokyo Declaration on Collaborative Action for Media Literacy in East Asia (Tokyo Declaration)

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Introduction

The following short document is a draft declaration on media literacy in East Asia presented as part of MELL Project Symposium 2006 (“Seeding of MELL”), held at the Faculty of Law & Letters Bldg. 2 on the University of Tokyo Hongo Campus Saturday, March 4 and Sunday, March 5, 2006. The event was attended by approximately 250 persons.

The Media Expression, Learning and Literacy Project (MELL Project) is a practical research group addressing media literacy and expressive skills for citizens. With activities based at the Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies in the University of Tokyo’s Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Information Studies, the Project’s diverse membership of some 80 individuals drawn from across Japan includes researchers, graduate students, members of the broadcast media, schoolteachers, and representatives of non-profit organizations and citizens’ groups. Like a loose-knit guild, this networked organization undertakes activities loosely connected not just to media literacy, but to activities from play approaching the state of media art to practical activities intended to nurture media expression by the citizenry. These activities involve a broad range of media, from mass media, including broadcasting, newspapers, and books, to the Internet and mobile phones.

Yuhei Yamauchi and Shin Mizukoshi played central roles in launching the MELL Project in 2000, when the Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies was established. The Project was officially launched with its first symposium in January 2001. As initially planned, these symposiums concluded in 2006, after five years. Naturally, not all of these experiments will

end. A broad range of activities originating with the MELL Project are currently being deployed across Japan, East Asia, and North Europe. Plans also call for the launching of new social-cooperation projects and organizations in the near future at the Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies as successors to the ideas and methodologies of the MELL Project.

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Over the five years of MELL Project activities, Yamauchi, Mizukoshi, and other members of the Project came into contact with a broad range of media-literacy activities currently underway, as well as with researchers, businesspersons, and others implementing such activities around the world, particularly in the East Asian countries of South Korea and Taiwan. These experiences have shown that the new media ecosystem at the start of the 21st century requires a reconsideration of traditional media literacy concepts originating in countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada. We must critically examine these concepts in the context of East Asian cultures and societies and collectively seek out new ideas, frameworks for recognition, and methodologies for media literacy.

It is thought that this cross-border cooperation in turn will lead to more effective development of media literacy in Japan. In recent years in particular, a tendency toward conservatism has become apparent in the statements and practice of media covering Japanese society, amid factors such as reactions to globalization, a prolonged economic downturn, and a trend toward growing income inequality, as well as the chaos of digital media. This tendency poses the risk that media literacy may be trivialized into mere protectionism.

While sounding the alarm on such conservative and protectionist tendencies, on the stage of the MELL Project's finale, we proposed a perspective intended to lead to a new ideal for media literacy in East Asia.

The draft below was prepared through repeated discussions involving Shin Mizukoshi,

Taiwan's Chen Shi-Ming and Sophia Woo, South Korea's Jon Hyeon-Seong, and Japan's Yuhei Yamauchi. Much of the content, naturally, is grounded in results achieved by the MELL Project over its five years. Plans call for additions and revisions based on views obtained through symposium discussions, website publication, and printed materials. This Tokyo Declaration will also be used as guidelines for developing various new activities.

This Tokyo Declaration is not intended to serve as a message addressing only the MELL Project or those involved in the Project. Rather, it addresses all those interested in media expression, learning, and literacy.

Finally, several key matters pointed out in symposium discussions are listed below. Each is considered an important topic requiring further consideration.

(1) On the concept of basic media literacy covered under "5" below

Media literacy is multi-layered. The assumption of the presence of universal, substantial subjects was considered unusual in light of similar earlier debates in the field of linguistics. Although the emphasis on a basic level is based on hazards pointed out in criticism of the media-literacy boom, the term "basic" can easily replace "universal" and "substantial." As such, future critical study is likely to be necessary. In addition, there is a need to seek out appropriate media-literacy typologies suited to the environment of the multimedia age, given the interweaving of different media.

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(2) On sustainable development and the systematic guarantees covered under "7" below

The matter of implementing these concepts calls for broad discussions among the actors, including national and local government agencies and individuals involved in education. It remains unclear who specifically would assume these roles in Japan. Those involved in the MELL Project are well aware of this need and have every motive to encourage such discussions in a networked manner.

Korean- and Chinese-language translations of the Tokyo Declaration included in the abstracts of the MELL Project Symposium 2006 are attached to the following study. Plans call for preparing an English-language version as well if a revised version is released in the future. The Korean-language version was translated by Hwang Johee (a part-time instructor at Seoul National University of Technology) and the Chinese-language version by Liu Xue-Yan (a researcher at the Research Institute of Telecommunications and Economics). Both translators were members of the MELL Project. We are grateful for their efforts and believe these two individuals will help serve as ambassadors for future cooperative activities in East Asia.

■ Key points and background

This document describes a route for creating a public communication space that will lead to a more diverse media ecosystem in which people become independently capable of familiarizing themselves with media expression, learning, and literacy.

The document is based on tentative conclusions concerning the discussion of issues and possibilities for media expression by the citizenry and media literacy derived through repeated encounters and discussions in the MELL Project, beginning in the 2001 academic year, by media literacy researchers from three East Asian countries – South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. It was written by Shin Mizukoshi, one of the researchers involved.

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Future plans call for issuing a joint declaration highlighting media literacy issues shared by these three countries and proposing various efforts to address such issues, with the goal of encouraging cooperative action in the field of media literacy in East Asia.

Furthermore, following the issuing of the joint declaration, a document must be composed to address issues recognized by each of the three countries, as well as proposed solutions.

■ Issues related to media literacy

At the start of the 21st century, even in the bright democratic society created by the Internet, we have encountered not an information society protective of people's individuality and creativity, but a global information society biased toward the classic tendencies of authoritarianism and inflexibility. The field of media literacy in South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan primarily began to attract attention in the 1990s, when it began to develop following transplantation from North America and Europe. Despite this history, issues related to the global information society stretch as far as the eye can see.

Issues related to media literacy are growing increasingly complex.

First, with unremitting development in information technologies generating media progress focusing on technology, media literacy and the digital divide have become two sides of the same coin. A scheme of valuation in which superior knowledge is attained via media technology has begun to go unchallenged.

Second, the global distribution and propagation of information made possible by information technologies has triggered the appearance of new stereotypes and societal disputes in areas such as racialism, nationalism, regionalism, and gender. Against such a backdrop, the limits of addressing media literacy within the culture of a single country are readily apparent.

Third, a wide range of new media to connect with and act on individuals directly, without accounting for community units like the family, schools, and local society – a state of affairs that poses dangers for personal identity.

Against this backdrop, we have begun to gain a true feel for the limits of approaching media literacy solely in the form of critical, enlightening educational activities targeting popular culture delivered by mass media. What are the optimal forms for media literacy, given the media environment and communications between people in the 21st century? How can these

be designed?

We believe cooperation in East Asia is essential for addressing this issue.

■ The need for cooperation in East Asia

South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan each have their own historical and social contexts, and media and education are no exceptions. But the cultures of media and education in these lands have experienced complex transformations based on their traditional cultures, influenced by factors such as the use of Chinese characters in writing, Buddhism, colonization by Japan, and postwar Americanization. For this reason, and due to the progress of global information technologies since the 1980s, these countries share certain characteristics. These characteristics differ on a relative but not absolute basis from regions such as North America and Europe.

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The future demands cooperative action with regard to practices and research related to these shared characteristics, as well as efforts to understand each other's differences. This should permit the development of activities in the areas of ideological and practical media and communications to control media progress, focusing on technology and media-propagated stereotypes. The time has come to design a media literacy for East Asia.

■ Designing a media literacy for East Asia

A media literacy with the following characteristics must be developed for East Asia.

1. Integration with the currents of deeper human and social ideas

Not merely a collection of practical knowledge for a particular type of education, media literacy must be positioned and understood within the currents of deep knowledge springing from various 20th-century ideas, in recognition of the power of language, discourse, and culture (e.g., structuralism, semiotics, and cultural studies).

2. Layered fusion of media play, media literacy, and media practice

Rather than a species of isolated and special activity, media literacy must be seen within the broader context of human communication and learning. For this reason, it must be positioned in a limited and linked manner within a layered relationship with media play (activities that break down and rearrange media formats), as expressed notably in children's play and media art, and with media practice (activities socializing and making public what has been learned), as represented by public access media and other forms of citizens' media.

3. The cyclical nature of expression, reception/creation, and criticism

To enrich the critical reception of media literacy, we wish to emphasize the importance of active expression. Media creation and expression are linked in a cyclical relationship with media criticism and an awakening to issues. To ensure that such activities do not merely end in critical comments on media, programs must be developed to promote these cycles.

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4. Creating organizations to share new learning through the fusion of differing social spheres

Media literacy must not be relegated to citizens' movements that oppose mass media. Rather than viewing media organizations from the outset as objects of criticism and institutions of power, a pluralistic presence must be recognized by focusing on the people who create information and express it in the media. While maintaining a relationship of critical tension with media organizations, we must take a liberal approach to creating joint bodies for new types of learning in a cooperative relationship with such organizations.

Similarly, we must avoid systematizing media literacy merely as part of a formal education. Formal education, social education, museum education, and library education, traditionally distinct, can achieve effective cross-functional, cross-boundary joint success in the field of media literacy.

5. Pursuing basic media literacy

The appearance of interactive or personal media, as typified by the Internet and mobile media, has made mass media increasingly interactive. Media no longer consists of the mass media only. The appearance of new media has led to new forms of communication and culture.

We must design a new media literacy suited to these forms, although each individual media type does not have its own unique form of media literacy. In the second stage, we must relativize traditional mass-media literacy through comparisons to the new media literacy to discover a more fundamental layer of media literacy and to create a framework for achieving an overall image of media literacy.

6. Fusion of knowledge from critical analysis and practical design knowledge

The development of media literacy in East Asia must be based on relatively new and unique methodologies that fuse knowledge from critical analysis in the humanities and social sciences and practical design knowledge from art, design, and science. To date, most socially successful media literacy projects have come from the effective combination of these elements. But the importance of methodology has not been adequately recognized. For this reason, today's approaches to media literacy are inarguably implemented in different ways in fields such as media theory and education. To achieve the various cyclical and shared natures discussed above, it is vital to establish independent methodologies to support various activities.

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7. Sustainable development and systematic guarantees

Standardizing and systematizing programs and tools will be essential for achieving sustainable development of new communication design and learning for media literacy. Citizens must proceed with independent standardization and systematization linking on a local basis alongside formal education based on a global perspective, social education, media

organizations, various organizations in civil society, universities, and the fields of art and design. National and local governments must systematically guarantee the conditions for promoting such activities.

Of course, as used herein, the terms standardization, systematization, and systematic assurance refer not to rendering such a structure inflexible, but to applying a strong, flexible critical outlook and the provocative spirit that is the traditional hallmark of media literacy.

Media literacy with the above characteristics must be developed as a relatively new research field. In turn, this should lead to diverse and blended activities and to hybrid forms of media literacy.

■ Risks

We believe Japan faces the risks listed below, which must be met critically and constructively. We must examine whether these issues are unique to Japan or can be shared with South Korea, Taiwan, or other countries.

- Coexistence of multiple types of literacy

From the perspective of media theory, the idea that each individual type of media would have its own literacy is inappropriate. We need to approach media literacy as both segmented and coordinated, from basic issues to individual characteristics.

- Political conservatism of the protectionist approach

We must be wary of reflexive criticism of the negative influences of media, the enlightened approach concerning what adults can learn from children, and movements of power glorifying such approaches. We must recognize the importance of unceasingly questioning and criticizing our own perspectives.

- Mixing media theory and media literacy

Citizens require the knowledge to understand the negative aspects of media and to avoid crimes, incidents, and other issues. Nevertheless, we must distinguish such educational activities from media literacy activities both critical of the media and intended actively to awaken people.

- Consolidation through the existing educational system and academic research

Although media literacy is heir to a diverse pedigree of formal education and social education, it cannot be part of existing systematized educational spheres. Although it draws upon knowledge from fields such as media theory, education, and semiotics, media literacy cannot be called a part of any academic discipline. It is a cross-functional field transcending traditional academic boundaries to break down issues faced by schools and education.