

# Regaining Impact

## *Media Education and Media Literacy in a Norwegian Context*

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### **Abstract**

Media education is regaining its impact in Norwegian education, both due to the development of a new subject at the upper secondary level and due to a renewed interest in media literacy across the curriculum. From being defined as a marginal issue in educational curricula and development during the 1980s and 1990s, media literacy has now become a key concern linked to technological developments in the Nordic societies over the past ten years. With the Norwegian context as a point of departure, the present article looks especially at media literacy as an expression of certain practices, and at how media education represents a distinctive prerequisite for understanding what young people do with media outside and inside the schools. The article presents results from the first national survey on media education in Norwegian upper secondary schools. A special focus is directed towards the diverse production practices among what are called “school producers” (SP) and “crossover producers” (CP).

**Keywords:** media literacy, media education, digital production

### **Introduction**

The most recent turn of the century marks a radical change in media education in Norwegian upper secondary schools. In 2000, a new subject, ‘Media and communication’, was introduced as an option for students in vocational training at the upper secondary school level (age 16-19). The new subject became very popular, and the number of schools offering the course increased from less than 20 to over 120 in eight years. This development in Norway is part of a global trend towards interpreting media education as a strategy for student empowerment (Carlsson, Tayie, Jacquinet-Delaunay & Tornero, 2008).

Media literacy is a central issue in media education, and also an issue across the school curriculum. From being defined as a marginal issue in educational curricula and development during the 1980s and 1990s, media literacy has now become a key concern linked to technological developments in our societies over the past ten years (Livingstone, 2004; Martin, 2005; Comrie, Vaccarino, Fountaine & Watson, 2007; Zacchetti & Vardakas, 2008). Debates about media literacy vary greatly across different regions in the world and are embedded in technological, cultural and historical developments (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, 1999; Carlsson et al., 2008). The status of media education internationally reflects an increased interest in how young people relate to media developments in our societies today, and what it means to

be empowered as a citizen in digital societies (Wilhelm, 2004; Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona, 2007).

With the Norwegian context as a point of departure, the present article looks especially at media literacy as an expression of certain practices, and at how media education represents a distinctive prerequisite for understanding what young people do with media outside and inside the schools. Media education provides a ‘bridge’ between everyday experiences of using different media and the knowledge building created within the formal school setting (Burn & Durran, 2007; Buckingham, 2007). In addition to outlining these broader developments of media education and media literacy, the present article focuses especially on the following research question: What impact do everyday experiences with media and digital tools have on students’ production practices in media education?

The article begins with a description of recent developments in media education in Norway and follows up with a discussion on literacy and media in the context of recent research. In the last part of the article, we present results from the first national survey on media education in Norwegian schools. We specifically look into the diverse production practices among what are called “school producers” (SP) and “crossover producers” (CP).

### **Preconditions: Access and Media Use in a Nordic Context**

In the Nordic countries, the preconditions for media education and media literacy are strongly related to the overall access to digital media and the standard of living more generally, the so-called ‘Welfare State model’ of technology innovation and social transitions (Himmanen and Castells, 2004). In this case, the Nordic countries are of interest as a context for studies about the penetration and access to new digital technologies in societies as a whole and more specifically as a test-bed for media literacy. As digital technologies have become cheaper, easier to handle by most people, and available through different platforms (laptops, mobile phones and so forth) people’s ability to buy and access such technologies have increased.

In the Nordic countries, access to the Internet is over 95% among youth in the age group 16 to 24. People have access either at home, at school, work, libraries or other settings. More than 90% of young people in this age group use the Internet on a weekly basis. Compared to other countries in EU, the “Nordic context” for media use is quite exceptional with respect to the percentage of daily users and amount of time spent using digital media (Eurostat, 2007).

Several reports indicate that young people in Norway spend less time on traditional mass media and more time creating digital content as ‘advanced users’ (Brandtzæg & Heim, 2007). This social and cultural context, combined with high access to digital tools, makes children and youth in the Nordic countries heavy users of new technology compared to children and youth in most of the other European countries (Eurostat, 2007; Livingstone & Bovill, 2001; Drotner, 2001; Brandtzæg & Heim, 2007).

### **Reviewing Media Education and Media Literacy**

Traditionally, media literacy is understood as the: “ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts” (Ofcom, 2006). Similar definitions have been presented that focus more specifically on the development of digital technologies.

In the report *Digital transformations. A Framework for ICT Literacy*, it is stated that: “ICT Literacy is using digital technology, communications tools, and/or networks to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information in order to function in a knowledge society” (Educational Testing Service, 2001). Most of these definitions of media or digital literacy specify the importance of being able to access media, to make judgements about information received, as well as to express and produce media content. Media education is most commonly understood as the context for teaching and learning about media, and: “media literacy is the outcome” (Buckingham 2003: 4). Media education, as a *specific* subject, is a formal learning context in which children and young people learn about media by learning theory, performing analyses and producing their own media products (Buckingham 2003).

The dominating perspectives on media literacy and media education during the past fifty years may be divided between a policy-oriented perspective and a user-oriented perspective. The first has been concerned with the consequences of media developments for the individual, and then using regulation, legislation and curricula to make statements about the importance of media literacy and media education. This approach is still a central part of the policy agenda (see, e.g., Byron, 2008). The latter has been more oriented towards the ways in which young people use media and how they make meaning, using different modes of digital content in the creation of media (Burn & Duran, 2007; Erstad, Gilje, de Lange, 2007a). The present line of argumentation follows the latter tradition, using the first as a frame of reference.

In Europe, a large study on ‘the current trends and approaches to media literacy in Europe’ was undertaken in 2007 (Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona). This report emphasized the importance of media literacy as a key prerequisite for citizenship:

The aim of media literacy is to increase awareness of the many forms of media messages encountered in their everyday lives. It should help citizens to recognize how the media filter their perceptions and beliefs, shape popular culture and influence personal choices. It should empower them with the critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills to make them judicious consumers and producers of information. Media education is part of the basic entitlement of every citizen, in every country in the world, to freedom of expression and the right to information and it is instrumental in building and sustaining democracy. Today Media Literacy is indeed one of the key pre-requisites for active and full citizenship and is one of the contexts in which intercultural dialogue needs to be promoted. Also, media education is a fundamental tool to raise awareness on IPR issues among media users and consumers. ([http://ec.europa.eu/avpolicy/media\\_literacy/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/avpolicy/media_literacy/index_en.htm))

The important question is then how this policy might have an impact on the individual level. The most interesting dimension, from our point of view, is the role of production practices in the context of media education. It is within media production using new digital tools that the most evident changes have occurred – changes that have implications for re-developments within media education during the past years.

### **Media and Literacy: An Interdisciplinary Approach**

There is currently a growing body of research on the interrelationship between different media and the concept of literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). As defined by the New London Group in their manifesto from 1996 (New London Group, 1996;

Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), the understanding of ‘literacies’, in plural, has moved more and more towards how people relate to multiple text formats, what the New London Group term ‘multiliteracies’ (ibid.) and ‘multimodality’ (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). New Literacy Studies, as it is now termed, is located in the intersection of sociolinguistics, anthropological theories of language, and educational and learning theory using mainly ethnographic and discourse methodologies. It opens up broader conceptions of what it means to ‘read’ and ‘write’ using available cultural tools (Schultz & Hull, 2002: 21; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008).

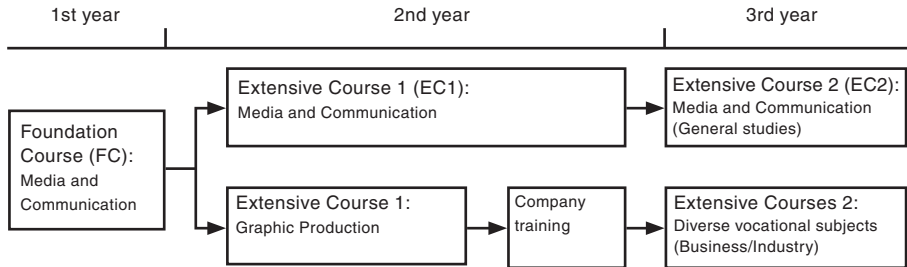
Of special interest is the visual and social approach emerging from the field of literacy studies, which offers new approaches to our understanding of media literacy (Snyder, 2007).<sup>1</sup> Several studies in this tradition indicate that young people today relate to many different modes of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ in a variety of different contexts. One important aspect of media literacy is therefore the interconnection between formal and informal contexts of learning. In other words, how media education in schools relates to production practices that young people are involved in outside of schools. Literacies are defined as multiple and situated within *social* and *cultural practices* and discourses. Lankshear and Knobel, for example, state that; “Identifying literacies as *social practices* is necessarily to see them as involving socially recognized ways of doing things.” (2007: 4). Going back to the now classic text by Scribner and Cole (1981), they describe literacy in terms of “socially organized practices that make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it” (p. 236). The important aspect is to look upon literacy not as something static, but as changing over time. Literacy is not about being able to read and write a particular kind of script. It is more a matter of “applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use” (ibid.). And as Lankshear and Knobel explain; “Literacies call us to generate and communicate meanings and to invite others to make meaning from our texts in turn.” (2007: 4). From this point of view, it is necessary to look at and extend the notion literacy practices (Barton et al 2000) as social and cultural practices in media education. Studying the practices of literacy has become a central perspective in recent research on how young people relate to and use new technologies. Media education is of special interest within such a perspective, as it represents a context where other modes than the written language are focused more specifically.

### **Towards a ‘Production Approach’ in Norwegian Media Education**

Media education has a long tradition in Norwegian education, going back to the mid-1970s (Erstad, 1997). However, like in most other countries the subject has traditionally had a marginal position in the national curriculum (Erstad, 2005; Domaille & Buckingham, 2004). Until the end of the late 1990s, the public discourse on media education as seen in curricula for compulsory schooling revolved around developing critical thinking among students in their relation to media messages. However, during the past eight years, there has been a shift towards emphasizing content creation and digital production. A new interest in media education emerged in connection with curriculum reforms in the late 1990s. This interest was due to the growing concern among interest groups in the graphic-design industry about implementing ‘media and communication studies’ at the upper secondary level (16- to 19-year-old students). The public debate was not only about the convergence of old and new media forms, but it was also strongly argued that there was a great need for such “media competence” in the future job market, especially in relation to production and design.

The course structure today (school year 2008/09)<sup>2</sup> is based on a joint first-year foundational course, after which students are to choose between a crafts-oriented specialization versus a course qualifying for higher education. The subject clearly emphasizes media production in both tracks. (See Figure 1)

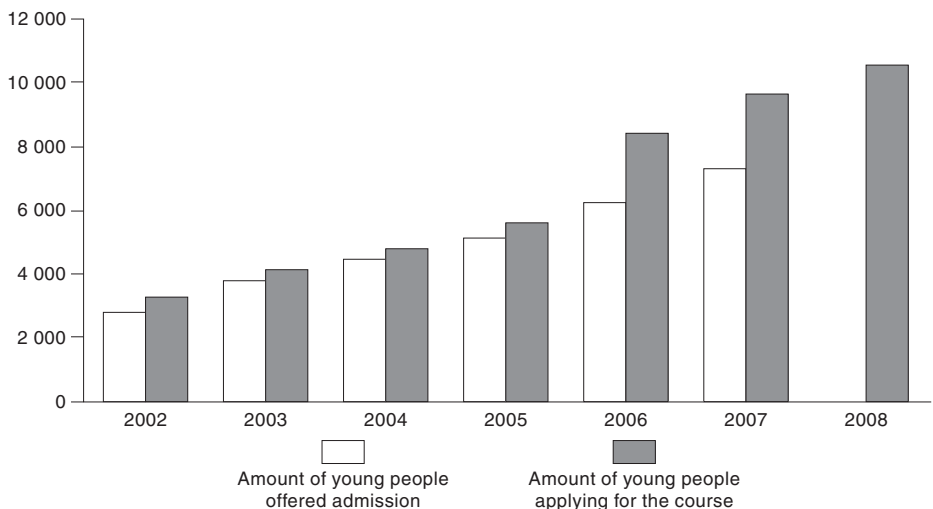
**Figure 1.** Structure of 'Media and Communication', vocational training, upper secondary level



In general, the course provides an introduction to basic principles in media and communication, combining text, image and sound so as to lay a broad foundation for higher education and employment. Furthermore, the course deals with various forms of communication, content distribution and expression within diverse media genres and fields (movie, photo, advertisement and web applications). The following core subjects are included in the course syllabuses: 'Media and communication', 'The individual and society', 'Media design', 'Media production' and 'History of Expression' (Erstad, Gilje & de Lange 2007a).

An increasing number of upper secondary schools in Norway have now chosen to offer Vocational Media and Communication courses due to their popularity. To give an indication of the increasing interest in this subject, Figure 2 shows the number of students applying to take this subject from 2002 until 2008.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 2.** The Amount of Students Applying (and offered admission) for the Subject Media and Communication 2002-2008



Note: Directorate of Education<sup>4</sup> – 2008.

Figure 2 shows an increase in the number of students applying to take this course in Media and Communication during the six years covered by these statistics. We can also see that from 2005 onwards the number of students applying increases more than the number of students admitted. The number of places available at the schools obviously does not cover the demand among young people for gaining qualifications within the domain of media and communication. This growth, both in the amount of students applying and the number of students admitted to this program, indicates a major change in the popularity and status of this subject in Norwegian compulsory education. Due to the increase of schools and students involved, as well as its relevance to issues of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills and competencies (Lisbon Council, 2007; OECD, 2005), the program has developed into an important subject area at this level of schooling. Similar developments have not been seen in any other subject area.

Another explanation might also be that the new subject Media and Communication emphasizes media production over the more theoretical approaches. The student's produce media in a wide range of projects through the three-year vocational course using an array of different software and digital tools. In our national survey (Erstad, Gilje & de Lange 2007b), we decided to focus on two of these production processes, the *production of web pages* and *the editing of digital video*.

### **“Media Producers of the Future” – A National Survey**

This section presents findings from the first national survey on the subject Media and Communication at the upper secondary school level in Norway.<sup>5</sup> The initial steps of this national survey were two, ongoing PhD projects (for details, see Erstad, Gilje & de Lange, 2007a). The preliminary findings from these projects generated new questions and issues.<sup>6</sup> The sample in the survey consisted of 735 students who were about to finish a three-year upper secondary level course in media education. It is reasonable to suspect that these students are more oriented towards media in general than other youth, as they applied for and followed this course. But at the same time, they might have had quite diverse experiences of producing media in their leisure time, which is a key question to explore in the present article. These are students with good grades on average, as there is competition for getting a place in this school programme (Erstad, Gilje & de Lange, 2007b). Compared to other students in upper secondary schools, these students have very good access to a computer with a broadband connection, both at school (100%) and at home (94%).

In this ‘digital’ context, we want to explore the diverse practices of two groups of students, school producers (SP) and crossover-producers (CP). In the next section, we will elaborate on these empirical terms and explore the production practices in relation to *the production of web pages* and *the editing of digital video*.

### **Multimodal Texts and Editing Software – Differences in Production Practices among SP and CP**

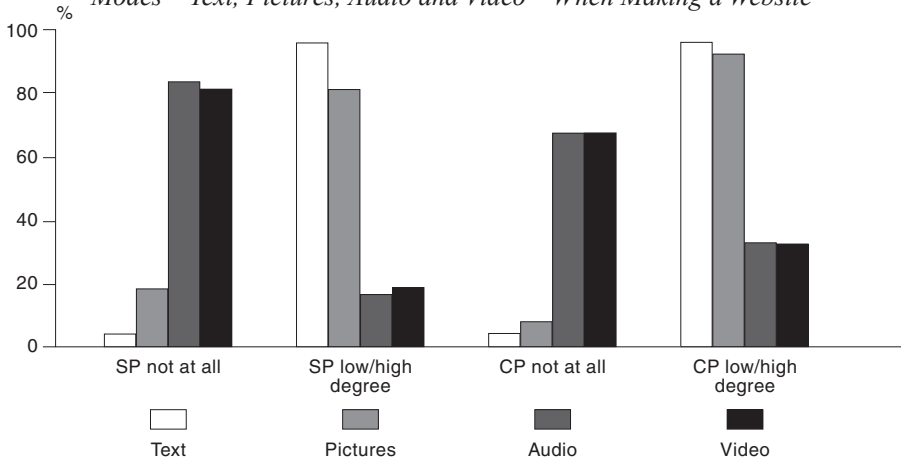
One important change relating to Web 2.0 is the development of web pages that use a broad range of different modes and media.<sup>7</sup> In the past few years, it has become more common to use different media such as animation and moving images in addition to text and pictures on websites (Skjulstad & Morrison, 2005). In general the survey showed that most of the students only used text and pictures when they produced websites.

But one out of five (20%) had included sound or moving images. More students (over 40%) had experience with animation (flash) in their web production at school (Erstad, Gilje & de Lange 2007b). These numbers basically tell us that many students in media education use diverse experiences of text production where the purpose is to produce a web page.

In the survey, we asked the students whether they produced web pages and video in their leisure time. Those students who indicated production experiences from both the school setting and during leisure time were categorized as *crossover producers* CP (N=194/735). Those students who only had experience producing these media during the lessons in media education were categorized as *school producers* SP (N=176/735). In other words, we have used the production of *both* web pages and video as a decisive factor for dividing the students into two categories related to their production practices inside and outside the schools. These two groups (CP and SP), representing over 50% of the sample (194+176=370/735), represent a clear division among the students concerning their production practices. All the students produce both web pages and video at school. The crossover producers are *in addition* producing web pages and video during their leisure time, while school producers do neither. In addition to these two groups, we find students who either produce only web pages or only video as leisure activities. The latter group of students is very mixed and will not be discussed further here.

As Figure 3 below shows, use of text on web pages is more or less the same for school and crossover producers, and there is only a small difference in use of pictures between the two categories. This changes when we look at the use of audio and video. Crossover producers are more likely to integrate media such as sound and video (moving images) in their web productions at school. By looking at the two columns for audio and video, we can observe that more than 32% of the crossover producers use audio and video in their web pages at school, while less than 19% of the school producers use audio and video on web pages.

**Figure 3.** Comparison of School Producers' and Crossover Producers' Use of Different Modes – Text, Pictures, Audio and Video – When Making a Website

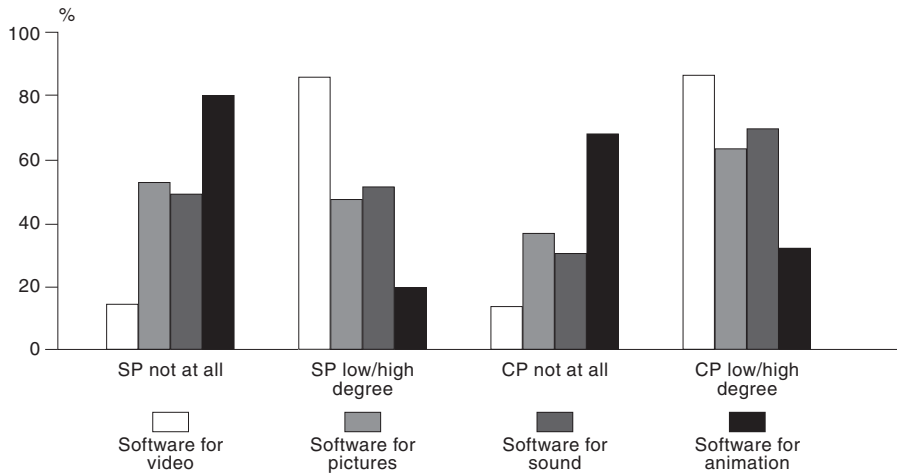


Despite the fact that we do not know the context and the assignment for these different web projects at every school, students in the two categories use different modes in their production of web pages at school.

The survey shows that more than 90% of the students make more than one video during the three-year programme. Regarding genre, short fiction movies and documentaries are most popular. But the students also make music videos, short animation movies and more experimental movies. Video is – despite the ‘digital turn’ – a medium in which conventions are related to the established use of moving images, sound and music. In other words, unlike web pages, the video medium is not in a process of change, despite technical aspects of the production practices that have been transformed owing to the digitization of moving images.

As shown in Figure 4, the school producers have a different pattern regarding use of software in the digital editing process of making video films. The use of software for images and sound is more common among crossover producers than among school producers. The crossover producers also use a wider range of different software when editing moving images (like Final cut Express, iMovie or Pinnacle), whereas the school producers’ use of different software is more restricted.

**Figure 4.** *A Comparison of Use of Diverse Software in a Project where Students were Supposed to Make a Digital Video*



These findings indicate that the majority of students perform advanced editing in their work with different modalities. In a qualitative case study, Gilje (2008) explored how googled and recorded semiotic material was edited and made ‘coherent’ in an array of different software when making a short documentary.

### **Publishing and Sharing – Diverse Practices among SP and CP**

The last issue in this section concerns publishing practices and participation among SP and CP in different non-formal contexts with media productions made at school. Normally, the production of a web page or a short movie remains a school assignment. The students complete production projects defined by the teacher and framed by the school context – projects that are later assessed by the teacher. However, due to the introduction of Web 2.0, many students publish their assignments on the Internet for various reasons. In the survey, nearly 60% of the crossover producers reported that they published the web page produced in their most recent project at school. In comparison, less than



40% of the school producers had done the same. This may indicate that the crossover producers are more oriented towards publishing and do not only view web projects as school assignments. When exploring what kind of web page they had produced as an assignment, over 20% of the CP reported that they had made a site for a company or person outside the school, while only 11% of the SP had done the same.

The same pattern appears in regard to filmmaking practices. In recent years, students in upper secondary school have become an important group as regards contributions to national film festivals for young people (Gilje, 2005). More than 20% of the crossover producers report that they have entered a film on an official film festival for youth, while only 3% of the school producers had done the same.

Traditionally, student productions have only been shown at schools, and the audience consists of other students, teachers and friends. These patterns are about to change. The survey shows that media students in Norway make media content intended to be shared in contexts outside schools. Both films and especially web pages are published on the Internet. Some students make videos to be shown in professional TV programmes, and many students enter their films in special film festivals for youth.<sup>8</sup> However, as presented above, different practices are observed between school producers and crossover producers.

### **Implications and New Questions**

As stated in the introduction, the Norwegian context for media production in and out of school is quite exceptional, both with regard to the high access to technology and Internet, and with regard to the emerging new subject Media and Communication in the upper secondary schools. The data from the present survey show how students in this particular subject have diverse production practices, based on the fact that they have different experiences in their leisure time. The findings indicate that there is a difference between the practices of what we describe as school producers (SP) and the practices of crossover producers (CP). The main point has been to show how crossover producers (CP), drawing on their production practices from outside the schools, are more likely to:

- make more advanced multimodal texts than school producers (SP) do
- use a larger variety of software applications than school producers (SP) do
- publish their products on the Internet and participate in film festivals to a larger degree than SP do

Taking these findings into account, it could be assumed that media education has an impact on production practices outside school for those who have no experience of such production in their leisure time. Such an argument has many implications for ongoing debates on media literacy in Norway, on an European level and elsewhere. Of special interest has been the role of production practices, and how new tools, multimodal texts and software developments have had an impact on the practices in this subject and on the media literacies of students. In this way, media education in schools is interpreted as an interesting case of broader cultural production processes using digital tools (Jenkins, 2007; Ito, 2006). Based on the present survey, it is not possible to make any claims concerning these broader cultural processes and the more qualitative aspects of production practices. There is a need for more in-depth analyses of the relationship between production practices in and out of school.

In regard to access to technology and the use of digital tools, Norway and the Nordic countries are ahead of other regions in the world. However, there seems to be a growing and common interest, both on a European level and in other parts of the world, in how issues of empowerment, citizenship, skills and competencies should be worked out and realized as an educational subject in the school curriculum.

Both the *why* and *how* of media education has been much debated (Buckingham, 2003). The argument presented here is that issues concerning both *why* and *how* are changing and gaining interest in broader educational debates. We suggest that media education and media literacy must be framed in the intersection between formal and informal ways of learning among youth. This subject draws largely on the experiences of young people from outside the schools.

We now see developments in which media literacy is becoming an important policy issue throughout Europe (Universidad Autonoma de Barcelona, 2007). This is due to improved access to computers and the Internet in schools and increased interest in the educational use of information and communication technologies (ICT). Such technological developments are seen by many policymakers as related to the development of our information or knowledge-based society. This means that there is an increasing focus on media literacies as a core competence in functioning as citizens in our societies now and in the future. The present article contributes to the growing body of research across different scientific disciplines concerning the implications of digital media as an embedded part of educational practices.

## Notes

1. The visual turn refers to the changing ways of meaning-making and multimodal communication, which are seen as part of literacy. The notion of multimodality highlights the diversity of texts in the new digital media landscape. In a multimodal perspective, literacy does not refer only to written language, but also to modes such as audio and music (van Leeuwen 1999), pictures (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996) and moving images (Burn & Parker 2003).
2. The course was re-structured from the year 2007/08, making 2008/09 the first year with the new course structure at every level.
3. Since the introduction of the subject in the upper secondary schools, the number of students has increased from 1500 to 9000, which means that one out of 20 students (5%) in upper secondary school (age 16-19) chooses this programme. The number of schools that see this as a chance to attract students has also increased, from 17 the first year (2000/01) to 120 in 2008/09.
4. By the time this article was finalized it was not possible to get access to the amount of students offered admission for the school year 2008-2009.
5. For a full version of the findings in the survey see: [www.transactions.uio.no](http://www.transactions.uio.no). The report is written in Norwegian and entitled: "Morgendagens medieprodusenter – Om mediefagsselevers produksjonspraksiser i videregående skole".
6. The possibility to make online questionnaires has made large-scale projects easier to handle on a relatively low budget. Our survey was based on an online questionnaire containing 72 questions, covering a wide range of issues from how the subject is organized in terms of lessons to the student's use of different media in his/her leisure time. The survey was conducted from November 2006 to January 2007. In total, 735 students, in their third year of upper secondary school, answered the online questionnaire. The participation rate in the survey was over 80%.

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7. We understand mode as written text, a picture or a sound. Media may consist of one or several modes. As a medium, a web page today is multimodal in nature, combining different modes, and some web pages are multimodal, including, e.g., animation and moving images.
8. All the Nordic countries have several film festivals for young people. See [www.dvoted.net](http://www.dvoted.net) for an overview.

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