

DECODING THE DIGITAL LANDSCAPE: MEDIA LITERACY FOR AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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Abstract

In the present-day context, media literacy assumes significant importance due to the growing integration of digital media into our everyday existence. Given the inherent vulnerabilities of certain audiences, it is imperative to emphasise the significance of taking action to address their specific accessibility requirements and literacy needs. The objective of this chapter was to provide a conceptual framework that delineates the primary needs and characteristics of individuals in the autism spectrum and establish connections between these attributes and the contemporary notion of “media literacy”. Through this mapping, it was possible to identify and critically explore a set of opportunities for neurodiversity-driven media education, including: (1) promoting authentic representations; (2) enhancing empathic media literacy; (3) foster neurodivergent talent in media production; and (4) advancing social advocacy through media. These pillars also intend to emphasize priorities for the forthcoming research endeavours in the topic.

Keywords: Media Literacy; Autism Spectrum Disorder; Neurodiversity; Accessibility; Empathic Media Education.

Introduction

In contemporary society, digital literacy holds immense relevance as technology becomes increasingly intertwined with our daily lives. This includes all forms of communication and participation, even the ability to foster institutional and non institutional forms of engagement in civic and political life (Polizzi, 2020) – to this extent considered as fundamental precursors of social inclusion (Simplican et al., 2015).

Considering their vulnerabilities, the need for action is particularly significant when it comes to audiences with specific accessibility needs. It is important to note that in the face of the great contradictions generated by the current “liquid world”, where we experience the best and worst of times, the digital society provokes such intense inequalities and cultural crises that we all reveal ourselves as fragile and vulnerable beings. This is of utmost importance and certainly justifies the mobilisation of political decision-makers and all those in civil society who can contribute to raising the levels of this literacy among society in general and, in particular, among various audiences with specific needs (Gomes da Silva, 2015). This need to focus on the media literacy needs of people with disabilities is emphasised by their significant representation on the research panorama in this field, including individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD; Sousa & Costa, 2022).

This chapter aims to conceptually map some of the main needs and characteristics of people on the autism spectrum and relate them to the current concept of “media literacy”. Hence, it intends to discuss some of the opportunities emerging from this theoretical relationship, opening paths for research and intervention.

Autism and Neurodiversity

In contemporary society, autism can be seen through different lenses, from the most medical or biological to the most socially constructed, emphasising the role of self-determination of people with these characteristics (Morán et al., 2021).

In the first group of conceptualizations, the most widely accepted definitions of autism come from established diagnostic criteria, primarily the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD; World Health Organization [WHO], 2019).

According to the DSM-5 (APA, 2013), ASD is distinguished by two fundamental domains of characteristics. The initial domain pertains to deficits in social communication and interaction, encompassing enduring challenges in social-emotional reciprocity. These difficulties are evident in the context of engaging in reciprocal dialogues, expressing emotions, and demonstrating empathy towards others. Individuals diagnosed with ASD may encounter challenges in the realm of nonverbal communication, including the comprehension and utilisation of gestures, facial expressions, and body language as means of expressing emotions or intentions. Moreover, individuals frequently encounter challenges in establishing and sustaining interpersonal connections, encompassing difficulties in cultivating friendships and a diminished inclination towards engaging in social interactions.

The second primary domain is distinguished by the presence of Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behaviour, Interests, or Activities. This encompasses the manifestation of repetitive movements, speech patterns, or object utilisation, such as hand-flapping, echolalia (the repetition of others' words), or inflexible adherence to established routines. Individuals diagnosed with ASD frequently exhibit a tendency towards fixated interests or intense preoccupations pertaining to particular subjects or objects. Individuals may also demonstrate a tendency to resist change, resulting in feelings of distress when their established routines are modified. Moreover, a significant number of individuals encounter atypical sensory experiences, which can manifest as either a heightened desire for sensory stimulation or an increased sensitivity to sensory input (APA, 2013).

In addition to medical interpretations, alternative definitions and perspectives on autism exist, which prioritise relationships, social frameworks, and the concept of neurodiversity. It is crucial to recognise these non-medical viewpoints, as they exert a substantial influence on the formation of attitudes towards autism, the advancement of acceptance, and the advocacy for the creation of inclusive and supportive settings for individuals on the autism spectrum.

In the present chapter, we will mainly focus on the neurodiversity lens, according to which, autistic individuals have unique strengths, talents, and ways of experiencing the world that should be recognized and respected (Leadbitter et al., 2021). According to Kapp et al. (2013), these views are not incompatible, since both the “deficit-as-difference” conception and

human behaviour research tend to support approaches that embrace, rather than eradicate, autism, based on one's relationship to the individual's characteristics or level of awareness regarding neurodiversity. Furthermore, the social model of disability has significant implications for researchers in the field of media and digital literacy. It enables them to recognise that the lack of accessibility in their projects is the issue, rather than attributing it to the characteristics of autistic individuals (Barnes, 2020).

Dunn & Andrews (2015) propose that a recommended approach within the realm of Psychology involves soliciting input from project participants regarding their preferred terminology in relation to disabilities. In the context of academic research, it is imperative for writers to thoroughly examine the social, political, and cultural contexts surrounding the individuals they are discussing. It is essential to comprehend that when employing this methodology, there is expected to be variability in preferences and consensus within the collective concerning the selection of linguistic structures and the appropriate timing for their utilisation. Hence, the forthcoming chapter will adopt a person-first and identity-first approach, aiming to foster human dignity while upholding scientific and professional rigour.

Media Literacy and Digital Literacy

Defining concepts like “media literacy” or “digital literacy” can always be a research approach in itself. However, for what matters to the present chapter, it is important to find operational definitions that allow understanding and mapping challenges and opportunities for people on the autism spectrum. To clarify, in the present chapter, the definition of media literacy developed by Renee Hobbs (2010; 2021) will be adopted, considering how it emphasises the development of critical thinking skills, active engagement, and ethical decision-making in relation to media messages. Moreover, the author's approach to media literacy highlights the importance of empowering individuals to navigate the media landscape effectively and to become responsible and creative media users and producers, being in alignment with the currently empowerment-driven and emancipatory models adopted in the field of ASD research (Cascio et al., 2021; Chown et al., 2017). This definition, developed by Hobbs in 2010 and further explored in 2021, is mainly composed of five components, as below.

- a) Accessing: Media literacy involves having the skills and resources

to access and retrieve information from various media sources, as well as “accurately comprehending messages” (Hobbs, 2021, p. 5).

- b) **Analysing:** Media literacy includes the ability to critically analyse media messages, identifying the techniques, biases, and intended effects used by media creators. Here, important aspects include veracity, credibility, or point of view.
- c) **Creating:** Media literacy involves the capacity to create meaningful media messages, utilising various forms of media production tools and techniques. To this extent, Hobbs (2021, p.5) emphasises “creativity and confidence in self-expression”.
- d) **Reflecting:** Media literacy encourages reflection on personal and societal values, as well as the influence and impact of media on individuals and communities.
- e) **Taking action:** Media literacy encompasses the ability to take informed and responsible action, such as advocating for media justice, participating in media activism, and using media for positive social change.

As for the concept of “digital literacy”, Hobbs (2021, p. 9) argues that it is part of a set of terms that emerged due to the “range of people, academic disciplines, and knowledge communities who have come to see the value of new competencies for navigating the media-saturated society of the 21st century”. Digital literacy can be described as the knowledge, mindset, and abilities necessary to actively engage and participate in the utilisation of the internet and social media platforms. It encompasses the skills needed to navigate the digital realm effectively, critically evaluate information, and engage in meaningful interactions within the online environment (Hobbs, 2021).

Opportunities for Neurodiversity-Driven Media Education

The utilisation of neurodiversity-focused media education offers a compelling and comprehensive method for building awareness, compassion, and respect towards individuals who have neurodevelopmental variations, such as ASD. Based on the current state of the art, this section examines the potential opportunities that emerge from the inclusion of neurodiversity principles into media education. It presents a transformative viewpoint on the creation, distribution, and consumption of media content.

1) Promoting Authentic Representations

One notable opportunity emphasised in the existing body of literature pertains to the imperative of fostering genuine and varied portrayals of individuals diagnosed with ASD. It is worth noting that the prevailing depictions of individuals with ASD are often fraught with issues and predominantly centred around those with high support needs (Jones et al., 2023). Based on the findings of Jones et al.'s (2023) Systematic Literature Review (SLR), autism is predominantly depicted as a source of fear or as an important hurdle. One instance of a favourable portrayal of autism in the media can be observed in the television series *Atypical* (Rashid, 2017-2021). Despite the diverse range of identities and behaviours that can exist within the autism spectrum, the show depicts Sam Gardner (Figure 1), a character who possesses a genuine interest and the ability in establishing romantic and sexual relationships. Yet, as we will explore below, the inclusion of individuals with ASD as actors in these representations can make them even more inclusive and acceptable to the community (Nordahl-Hansen, 2017).

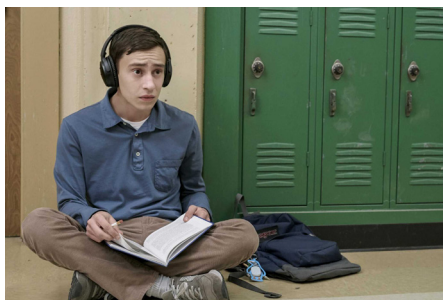


Figure 1 - Sam Gardner in *Atypical* (Rashid, 2017-2021). 2017-2021 Sony Pictures Television Inc. All rights reserved.

2) Enhancing Empathic Media Literacy

The integration of neurodiversity-focused content into media education can be an opportunity to facilitate a greater comprehension and empathy among neurotypical individuals towards the experiences of those who are neurodivergent. Through the exposure of audiences to a range of perspectives, the media has the potential to foster significant connections and bridge the gap in empathy (Throop, 2023). These educational initiatives might have the potential to not only address attitudinal barriers but also have a positive impact on the development of media literacy skills (Sousa & Costa, 2022). By fostering the practice of critically analysing media portrayals of neurodivergent characters and themes, individuals

may cultivate a more discerning attitude towards consuming media. In the given context, an increased level of media literacy could potentially enable individuals to critically analyse and challenge representations that perpetuate detrimental stereotypes of autism. Moreover, it may hypothetically motivate them to actively seek and endorse media content that is more genuine, diverse, and inclusive.

3) Foster Neurodivergent Talent in Media Production

The incorporation of neurodiversity principles into media education has the potential to enhance the acknowledgment and empowerment of individuals with neurodivergent traits in the media production sector. Through the creation of opportunities and accommodations tailored to the needs of neurodivergent individuals, the field of media production can effectively access a diverse range of distinctive perspectives and innovative insights. The act of endorsing and enhancing the voices of individuals who are neurodivergent can contribute to the enhancement of the media environment, thereby fostering a more diverse and complex narrative encounter for viewers. Moreover, to ensure this opportunity as a pillar for the future would imply fundamental changes in the educational scenario, to provide these students with the required skills to be effective media producers (Ressa, 2022).

4) Advancing Social Advocacy Through Media

The utilisation of media education centred around neurodiversity can provide an opportunity to serve as a significant catalyst for promoting social advocacy and facilitating transformative societal shifts. Through the dissemination of narratives that emphasise the obstacles faced by and the unique abilities possessed by neurodivergent individuals, media content might have the potential to enhance public consciousness and support policies that prioritise the provision of accessible environments, inclusive practices, and robust support systems for communities. The media has the potential to function as a platform for the amplification of advocates and activists (Babo & Taborda, 2019; Zúñiga et al., 2014), thereby facilitating a more comprehensive and inclusive public dialogue concerning matters pertaining to neurodiversity.

If we look at the emerging lines of opportunity explained here, with Hobbs' (2010; 2021) definition of media literacy as a framework, it is possible

to realise the potential role of media education for a more neurodiverse society, which has access, analysis, reflection, creation and action through the media as its pillars. These premises are systematised in Table 1.

Table 1 - Summary of opportunities for neurodiversity-driven media education related to the components of media literacy (Author's elaboration, based on Hobbs [2010; 2021])

Opportunities for neurodiversity-driven media education	Related components of media literacy based on Hobbs (2010; 2021)	Explanation
Promoting authentic representations	Accessing Analysing Taking action	People with ASD's access to the media can be conditioned by the degree to which the media represent them, as well as the amount of bias that emerges when analysing them. This will be greater if they only encounter expressions of identity in the media that are read as neurotypical. Moreover, authentic representations may play a role in how society is more or less sensitised to the experience of those living on the spectrum, taking action for their social inclusion.
Enhancing empathic media literacy	Analysing Reflecting Taking action	The integration of neurodiversity-focused content into media education presents a valuable possibility for engaging in a thorough analysis and critical reflection of media artefacts. The implementation of this comprehensive approach has the potential to enhance individuals' agency in utilising media platforms, thereby fostering a society characterised by empathy and inclusivity, which takes action and provides support for individuals with neurodivergent traits.

Opportunities for neurodiversity-driven media education	Related components of media literacy based on Hobbs (2010; 2021)	Explanation
Foster neurodivergent talent in media production	Creating Taking action	By creating inclusive opportunities and accommodations, the field can consider unique perspectives and innovative insights. Providing neurodivergent students with the necessary skills to become effective creators is essential for their ability to take action through media.
Advancing social advocacy through media	Taking action	Media can serve as a forum for amplifying the voices of activists and advocates, fostering a more comprehensive and inclusive public discourse on issues pertaining to neurodiversity. Through this procedure, group activities can be organised to promote societal change and a higher level of acceptance for neurodivergent people.

Discussions, Limitations, and Future Directions

In order to suggest areas for research and intervention, this chapter has attempted to conceptually map the requirements and traits of people on the autistic spectrum in relation to media literacy. By promoting authentic representations, enhancing empathic media literacy, fostering neurodivergent talent, and advancing social advocacy through media, we can work towards a more inclusive and empathetic society. However, we must remain mindful of the conceptual nature of this exploration and the need for empirical validation. Additionally, there are a number of challenges that need to be addressed, such as the stigma that surrounds autism and the lack of accessibility of media for those with ASD. In the future, it will take a collective effort from researchers, media professionals, and advocacy organisations to address and overcome them.

In order to establish a connection between theoretical concepts and practical applications, forthcoming research endeavours ought to prioritise several pivotal domains. First and foremost, it is imperative for researchers

to explore strategies aimed at reducing the digital divide among individuals diagnosed with autism, thereby guaranteeing their fair and equal access to various forms of media and technology. By acknowledging and seeking to bridge this gap, we can facilitate the advancement of social inclusivity, enabling individuals to effectively and meaningfully interact with and contribute to various forms of media content and platforms.

Furthermore, it is crucial that forthcoming research places significant emphasis on incorporating neurodiversity within media education curricula. This approach entails the integration of inclusive teaching strategies that accommodate the varied learning preferences of individuals who are neurodivergent. By engaging in this practice, educators can enhance their ability to assist students in cultivating essential media literacy skills and cultivate an atmosphere of comprehension and inclusivity within educational contexts.

In addition, it is imperative to highlight the significance of employing participatory research methods in the examination of the link between autism and media literacy. The inclusion of individuals with ASD in the research process facilitates the acquisition of more profound and valuable insights pertaining to their experiences, perspectives, and requirements. By placing a higher emphasis on participatory methodologies, media literacy initiatives can be developed in a manner that is more precise and pertinent, thereby successfully amplifying the perspectives of individuals with autism.

By focusing future research endeavours on these pivotal domains, we can further develop the theoretical framework laid out in this chapter. The empirical studies conducted in these fields will provide valuable insights that can be utilised to develop evidence-based interventions and practical applications aimed at fostering positive outcomes for individuals diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder within the realm of media literacy.

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