

In January 2003, staff member Kendra Olson spoke with Michael Levine, professor of Psychology at Kenyon College, about the role of media literacy in the prevention of eating disorders. The transcript of the interview follows.

K: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. Since we're tight on time, I'm just going to jump right in – Why do you think media literacy is an important component of eating disorder prevention work?

ML: Well, that's probably the hardest question of all – how a number of us, myself and a number of other people, have come to think of literacy as a key component of prevention. Let me say that a lot of eating disorders prevention work in the last twenty years or so has followed the model that has been moderately successful in the prevention of substance use and abuse – for example trying to prevent middle school students from beginning to smoke cigarettes or trying to prevent high school students from using alcohol. That literature has been around since, really the 1960s. . . So I first got interested in this through that parallel. Was it possible to develop curriculum or was it possible to develop presentations that helped people understand how various aspects of culture, especially media, are working to promote unhealthy attitudes, unhealthy practices? And it didn't take long until I discovered that I wasn't alone in thinking in these terms and that people like Jean Kilbourne have been doing this kind of thing for a long time – and that's how I first came to see Jean and read some of her work and eventually meet her and talk about the process. As I got more interested in it and as I began to read more widely, I began to see that simply raising awareness about media and encouraging adolescents or encouraging adults to be aware and to watch out and sort of use their will-power to resist this wasn't going to be sufficient. . . And so, the literacy became expanded, in my mind and in the minds of the people I was working with, the literacy expanded to include becoming aware of how media are constructed and how media are used to influence people, to becoming aware of how citizens in a democracy can work individually and work together to challenge the types of media that are available, content of media, to begin to produce their own media. In other words, what I'm saying is that in the past few years working with Lori Irving and talking with Jean Kilbourne, and just trying to think more carefully about what I would like to do, it struck me that my own education, not only as a psychologist but as a father and as a feminist and so on had to do not only with learning about mass media and other forms of culture but in trying to take steps to change those things. . .

K: So, if you had your ideal media literacy education/prevention program, what would it look like?

ML: What we – and I say we now very broadly – what the National Eating Disorder Association [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org] has tried to do with its GO GIRLS! program – which I'm sure you're familiar with, and I was involved as a consultant in that program – what that program has tried to do is get the girls engaged in the process of not only learning about mass media and its content and negative effects, but extending that to activism and to advocacy, projects in the community which both address media issues (a billboard advertisement for instance, or the use of mannequins all of which are size 2 and don't seem to bear any resemblance to the way anyone looks) and also how to work with mass media. As you are putting together your campaign, for example, to have a more diverse range of mannequin sizes, or as you're putting together your campaign to develop programs for middle school girls, how you can use what you are learning about mass media to improve your program and also to promote it, to make it

newsworthy, to insure there is news coverage. So then, your program is not only affecting the GO GIRLS! but other people in the community are [also] being affected and the media is being affected. So you have concentric circles of influence operating. That is the goal at least.

K: You developed *The Media Literacy Circle of Empowerment* for the GO GIRLS! curriculum – can you explain this model?

ML: In the early 1900's, one of the foremost theorists of schizophrenia was a man named Bleuler, and he developed what is called "the four A's of schizophrenia" and those four A's referred to different aspects of schizophrenia like loose associations, and so playing with that I came up with five A's of media literacy – I based that on a lecture I heard Elizabeth Thoman give. The first A (try to imagine these as a circle) was *Awareness* – becoming more aware of the nature of media, the role of media in one's life, how much media one uses, what kinds of media one uses. The second A is for *Analysis*. In fact, analysis is what most people associate with media literacy – that is learning to think critically about mass media. The next and third A is within this model I was working with is *Activism*. Typically as media become more analytic about media, they become more upset or outraged. I'm sure you've had that experience. You watch something on TV and you say – *That's outrageous. How do they get away with that? Somebody ought to say something. Somebody ought to do something. This is outrageous.* And you realize that there's a long history of people transforming that impulse into action. There are a number of people like Joe Kelly's Dads and Daughters Inc., the nonprofit organization [www.dadsanddaughters.org]. The people at ANAD, another nonprofit organization [www.anad.org], challenged the Hershey chocolate advertising campaign, you may recall the one that said – *You can never be too rich or too thin.*

K: Hmmm, yes, I remember it.

ML: They got that one withdrawn. So the third A was for *Activism*. The fourth A in this model is for *Advocacy*. Advocacy, I believe is more proactive than the reactive activism. Rather than waiting until a number of things come out that activate you and you say – *That's ridiculous. They ought to withdraw this. They ought to change this* – I think advocacy has more to do with learning about mass media and learning how to use it. That is, how to talk to newspaper reporters, how to put together a public service announcement, how to put together a press release, how to put together a powerful presentation for a large audience where you are transforming your understanding of mass media and your understanding of the topic in question into messages that serve your purposes. Presumably that's a healthy purpose and not an unhealthy one.

K: Right.

ML: And then the fifth A, which brings us back in kind of a circle and not a straight line would be *Access* – How do you get those things into mass media? How do you take your "media" to "masses" of people? I began to see that as part of literacy also. Who owns radio stations? What are the licensing requirements for radio stations and how does that connect to public service or public good? If you had a group of middle school kids and you wanted them to create a public service announcement promoting tolerance for diversity in weight and shape, and they actually did that, how would you get that on the radio? Well, you would contact a radio station. What kind of position is that person

occupying? What are their responsibilities to the station and to the public? That presumably increases your awareness of mass media in your life and in the lives of others, which in turn leads to a deeper analysis etc, so we're going in a circle here.

K: Michael, when you get into ideas of ownership, do you address the concentrated ownership of the mass media and the way that affects representation and access?

ML: I understand what you are saying and that certainly would be an appropriate thing to look at, probably for high school and college students, possible even for advanced middle school students. Certainly in writing about this and speaking about it, I do that, but I don't want to make [my model] sound more advanced than it is. . .

K: Right. Let me take it in a little different direction, then. When we were in Santa Monica last fall [at the National Eating Disorder's Association Conference], during your presentation you said – and I'm paraphrasing you here – that preventing eating disorders is politics. Could you speak a little bit more about that perspective?

ML: It seems to me that when one talks about politics, one's talking about power and one is talking about the way that ideology is transformed sometimes very subtly into power, and other times quite overtly or even savagely to power. So when you talk about mass media, a lot of people will say – *Oh gosh what is there really to say about mass media? They show a lot of thin women, they are increasingly showing muscular men and there are not very many fat people and when there are, they are often figures of fun. What more is there to know?* I think, for example, in Jean Kilbourne's body of work (no pun intended) – the *Killing Us Softly* videos and all – she makes it very clear that it's not just thin bodies we're talking about. We're talking about thin bodies shown in passive displays; we're talking about thin bodies shown in certain kinds of displays in relationship to men; we're talking about text that goes along with these bodies, text that proclaim things like – *Open Season* or *Less inner thigh means more inner peace*; we're talking about a whole host of messages that serve to consolidate, to extend issues that have to do with status, power, control, and opportunity. To me those are all political kinds of questions. . . It's not nearly as simple – I wish it were – as men keep women subjugated. I think it's a lot more complicated than that. And as you know media have a great deal to say directly and indirectly about race and class and ethnicity, and they have a great deal to say, of course, directly about change. In one of the videos I show, there is a clip from an advertisement for fitness equipment and it shows a very tight and taught, determined young woman who is exercising, becoming more muscular as the music is thumping. She is clearly working out vigorously, and a message comes up on the screen that says – *Change in private*. Now, think about the politics in that. To me something like that says – *You got a problem? Some guy bothers you at work or you got a problem you can't walk across the campus without being hooted at. It's up to you to change in private*. To me, that is a political message. . . Imagine a group of girls in one of your local high schools who decide to take it upon themselves to do an ecological assessment of mass media in their high school – What posters are on the walls? what TV shows are being shown? what kinds of textbooks are being used? what kinds of messages are being given about women and strength and power? Do you see any way that *wouldn't* be political? Those girls are going to stir up trouble very likely, right? Think about the girls themselves and the parents and the facilitators and perhaps the administrator who put it in place; if they're really going to support that program, they have to be ready to themselves engage in that process of awareness, analysis, etc.. If they're not, the girls

are not going to get very far. And even for some people – *imagining* girls in their school doing this is in itself a political act. Even imagining it is a political act.

K: It's a political act that I hope more people take on. . . . Our time is just about up, and I know you have to run, but before we go, do you have any words of wisdom for educators who are using media literacy with the hopes of preventing eating disorders?

ML: I would just close with a quotation by Umberto Eco that I got from your materials, a quotation that I open some – and close some – talks and chapters with:

“A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection – not an invitation for hypnosis.”

K: Thank you, Michael. I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me.

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Michael Levine is a professor of psychology at Kenyon College. A leading figure in the study of eating disorders, his work embraces preventive education, mass media, and community psychology. He has published many articles and chapters on these topics and presented numerous papers and talks at professional meetings and educational conferences. He is a fellow of the Academy for Eating Disorders, and a member of the American Psychological Association, and the Clinical and Scientific Advisory Council of the non-profit organization National Eating Disorders Association.