A GUIDE TO MEDIA MENTORSHIP

By Lisa Guernsey

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The need for media mentorship is gaining urgency under three rapidly evolving and interrelated developments: The Digital Age has brought a deluge of new types of content and tools, from apps to social media networks to video streams. Becoming an informed citizen now demands new skills in filtering out disinformation, understanding how the media works, and thinking critically about media messages and tools. And the COVID-19 pandemic has required that more and more learning and exploration be mediated by digital media and technology, putting questions of digital equity front and center.

Media mentors can guide us in understanding and evaluating our media environment, and they can model ways to do that. They also provide a human connection that establishes trust and builds relationships with and among students, families, and community members. These mentors play a key role in addressing digital divides and inequities in educational opportunities, opening doors to resources and skill-building activities otherwise only available to those who have the resources to participate in camps, makerspaces, and afterschool programs on digital and media literacy. Media mentorship is part of building a more informed, discerning, and media-savvy citizenry, greater social cohesion in communities, and, ultimately, a stronger democracy.

Definition of Media Mentorship

Modeling and providing tailored guidance in selecting, analyzing, and using media in ways that support literacy, learning, and engagement.
world of information, particularly, but not exclusively, digital information and screen media. They help parents, educators, and students of all ages become more discerning and selective in their media choices, and they model ways of using media and information technology. Among their aims: to promote literacy (from foundational skills such as learning to read to more comprehensive skills such as media literacy), to support learning (helping families and students dive deeply into subjects and explore new material), and to foster engagement (including civic engagement as well as the use of new media tools to create and collaborate).

Public and school librarians are well positioned to take on this job—and many already do when given the support and training to extend their roles. A growing number of teachers, counselors, pediatricians, instructional technologists, and other professionals responsible for engaging with families and students are also applying techniques of media mentorship. Sometimes teenagers and young adults take on this role informally or as part of community-service work, supporting peers or older adults.

### The Growth of Media Mentorship

In the early 2010s, touch screen technology provided children with an ability to interact with digital media as never before, and app and e-book developers began creating new media for children at a feverish pace.

The resulting Digital Wild West presented a host of new challenges to educators and parents trying to keep up with resources for learning while also seeking guidance on how and whether to use new devices with their children. Seeing an opportunity to provide this guidance, Cen Campbell, a children's librarian in California, started a blog called Little eLit in 2012, which soon became a gathering space for other like-minded librarians who wanted to apply their skills—such as curation—to digital media as intently as they did to print media for young children.

### Key to Advancing Digital Equity

Access to broadband and devices is necessary but not sufficient to ensure that families, students, and community members can access information, complete their school work, apply for jobs, and contribute to their communities. They need mentors too. Those who already have access to media mentors for tailored, on-demand help are receiving tremendous advantages. If only the privileged few have the opportunity for this kind of learning, divides will grow wider. Media mentors are part of a new crop of jobs that advance a human-centered approach to digital equity, relayed through coaching and technical assistance.

These jobs include Tech Goes Home certified instructors (who operate in communities throughout Boston), Digital Connectors (community service jobs for youth supported by the city of Raleigh), and Digital Stewards (piloted in neighborhoods throughout Chicago, Detroit, and New York City). The case for investing in human capital to address digital inequities was made almost a decade ago in a Progressive Policy Institute report calling for a “digital teachers corps” and recently in a proposal for “digital learning ambassadors,” envisioned by Vikki Katz of Rutgers University in a recent Washington Post perspectives piece.

Photo: Allison Shelley for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action
In 2014 and 2015 leaders at the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), adopted the term “media mentors” and published the white paper Media Mentorship in Libraries Serving Youth, recommending that every library should have staff members dedicated to this work.  

Claudia Haines, a public librarian in Homer, Alaska, fleshed out the concept further in the book published by ALA and co-authored with Campbell, Becoming a Media Mentor.  

Chip Donohue, then director of the Technology in Early Childhood (TEC) Center at the Erikson Institute in Chicago, edited two volumes of essays in 2015 and 2017 in which teachers, researchers, and librarians explored the potential for media mentorship.  

Over the past decade, those who work with tweens and teens have also developed new programs and approaches to help young people gain skills in using and choosing media and technology. The YOUMedia Learning Labs Network, for example, includes librarians and other youth-services professionals who provide space for youth to create their own media, while gaining a deeper understanding of curation and evaluation.  

And the group known as Future Ready Librarians is focused on helping other educators by developing and curating digital learning resources and providing guidance on how new tools can be employed to help students become creators and not just consumers of media.  

The concept became the focus of training programs in Maryland and Illinois to provide peer-to-peer professional learning for librarians. It was also the impetus for Media Literacy Starts Young: Strategies for Media Mentorship in the Early Years and Early Grades, a symposium and workshop as part of the 2019 National Association for Media Literacy Education’s biennial conference. In June 2020, Erikson Institute published the Media Literacy and Early Childhood Report, funded by the Institute of Media and Library Services, which provided examples to librarians, educators, museum directors, parents, and caregivers on how to help young children develop skills in using and evaluating media of all kinds. In 2021, ALA will publish a new volume by librarian Dorothy Stoltz on peer-to-peer learning in media mentorship.
Next Steps for Media Mentorship

Policymakers and decision-makers need to create conditions that allow educators, librarians, and other professionals to learn and apply these skills. Many of these professionals are eager for more resources and training in this area. Library and school systems are already adopting frameworks and committing to principles that integrate media and digital literacy into professional development for staff.

Here are seven next steps:

1. Hire and retain librarians, teachers, and other professionals who are skilled in media mentorship.

2. Coordinate and share resources between schools, libraries, and community-based organizations.

3. Provide professional learning opportunities for media mentors, including spaces for peer-to-peer learning and developing skills in cultural responsiveness.

4. Budget for new technology and digital content necessary for staff to mentor youth and families.

5. Bring together faculty from schools of information science and schools of education to develop coursework on media mentorship.

6. Conduct needs assessments and listening sessions to ensure that mentorship matches community needs.

7. Expand broadband access so that it is available, reliable, and affordable to all households.

Learn More

Funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, this 2020 report provides examples of how teachers and librarians can support emergent media literacy skills.
https://teccenter.ericson.edu/publications/media-literacy-report/

Media Literacy Starts Young: Media Mentorship in the Early Years and Early Grades
See video of morning sessions and links to resources from New America’s 2019 workshop.

Peer Coaching Media Mentorship Toolkit
Developed by three Maryland libraries in 2017 and 2018, led by Harford County Public Library.

Media Mentorship in Libraries Serving Youth
The Association for Library Service to Children continues to update this page, which was first dedicated to the publication of its 2015 white paper, with resources, survey data, and examples.
http://www.ala.org/alsc/publications-resources/white-papers/mediamentorship

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Notes

1 According to the National Association for Media Literacy Education, media are defined as “all electronic or digital means and print or artistic visuals used to transmit messages.”

2 For more on Tech Goes Home, which partners with schools, libraries, and community-based organizations at 150 sites across Boston, see its website, https://www.techgoeshome.org/

3 The Digital Connectors started as Comcast Digital Connectors, a 2009 initiative that trained youth in digital literacy and sent them out in communities to help peers and older adults. The city of Raleigh is now running a Digital Connectors program based on that model. For more, see the Digital Connectors fact sheet at https://cityofraleigh0drupal.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/drupal-prod/COR24/DigitalConnectorsFactSheet.pdf


7 I gave a talk at TEDxMidAtlantic in fall 2013 coin this term and calling for a future in which every family had a mentor to help navigate the new digital terrain while using media and interactive technologies to support learning. See also Lisa Guernsey, Michael H. Levine, Cynthia Chiong, and Maggie Severns, Pioneering Literacy in the Digital Wild West: Empowering Parents and Educators (Washington, DC: Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, 2014), https://joanganzconeycenter/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/GLR_TechnologyGuide_final.pdf; and Lisa Guernsey and Michael H. Levine, Tap, Click, Read: Growing Readers in a World of Screens (New York: Jossey-Bass, 2015). For videos and free downloadable PDFs related to the book, see tapclickread.org


9 This paper by Cen Campbell, Claudia Haines, Amy Koester, and Dorothy Stoltz was published by the ALSC and adopted by its board of directors on March 11, 2015, http://www.ala.org/alsc/publications-resources/white-papers/mediamentorship

10 Claudia Haines, Cen Campbell, and the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), Becoming a Media Mentor: A Guide for Working with Children and Families (Chicago: ALA, 2016).

11 Technology and Digital Media in the Early Years: Tools for Teaching and Learning (New York: Routledge, 2015) and Family Engagement in the Digital Age: Early Childhood Educators as Media Mentors (New York: Routledge, 2017). Both books were co-published with the National Association for the Education of Young Children.


13 In March 2020, New America partnered with the Chicago Public Library, Schaumburg Township District Library, and the Skokie Public Library to conduct research on community needs and provide professional development opportunities on media mentorship for library staff. The project, including this guide, is funded by the McCormick Foundation.

14 For more about YOUmedia Learning Lab initiatives, see https://youmedia.org/about/


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