

# Canadian youth media literacy: Insights & Lessons

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**Abstract:** Today, mass media culture has a significant impact on young people, with a constant barrage of negative information. The education of media literacy for adolescents is urgently needed. Canada is one of the countries where youth media literacy education has been more successful, having established a complete educational structure system through schools, social organizations, governments, and families, characterized by rich implementation subjects, reasonable curriculum settings, and emphasis on practical abilities. The youth media literacy education in our country should draw on Canada's experience, starting with raising public awareness of media literacy education, and improve the practical ability of youth media literacy through the efforts of government and social group forces.

**Keywords:** Canada, Youth, Media Literacy Education, Enlightenment

## 1. Introduction

The information age has transformed the way people transmit and receive information, with media messages surrounding us constantly. The rise of media has provided adolescents with numerous channels to access information, which also includes vulgar information such as violence and pornography. Discerning right from wrong in the ocean of information and filtering out harmful distractions is an essential part of current media literacy education for adolescents. Canada is a country where media literacy education has been notably successful. By the end of the 1980s, media literacy education had been officially recognized in Canada, with Ontario being the first to incorporate it into the mandatory curriculum from a judicial perspective, and its "core concepts of media literacy education" have been cited by various countries. Media literacy research in our country started late and developed slowly; analyzing the successful experience of Canadian youth media literacy education provides important insights for promoting media literacy education among adolescents in our country.

## 2. Canadian media literacy: Key elements

### 2.1. The key to educational curriculum setting - schools

Canadian primary and secondary schools have strict regulations on media literacy education. Although the content and objectives of education vary, they share a common starting point: "to cultivate children and youth with the ability to understand and use media information through critical thinking, and ultimately to become modern citizens who can correctly use advanced information technology." For example, middle schools in the Atlantic coastal provinces set up courses according to the level of difficulty, with different grades having different educational goals. The 7th-grade media literacy curriculum mainly includes listening and speaking, reading and viewing, writing and other activities. The goals of the listening and speaking course are: students recognize that spoken language has linguistic tendencies, mainly due to values, beliefs, prejudices, etc.; the goal of the reading and viewing course is: students can realize that each medium has its own value tendencies, and different media information texts are designed for different readers, and they can use their language knowledge to critically evaluate a series of media texts; the goal of the writing and other course is: students can realize that writing is influenced by the audience's intentions and preferences, and can create for different audiences in different ways. At present, Canada's media literacy education system is more comprehensive, and the curriculum areas are becoming wider, expanding from English language courses to various subjects such as music and history. For example, in music classes,

compare pop music and traditional music to explore the connection of values; in history classes, combine historical figures, views, and biases to analyze how media reports on history affect people's perceptions. In terms of teaching methods, a progressive approach is adopted: younger students mainly understand media information texts led by teachers; middle-grade students focus on understanding the conventions and skills in media communication to establish a sense of self-identity; older students cultivate the ability to obtain effective information through media and improve their leadership. Canada pays great attention to cultivating students' autonomy in teaching, and students are not just "receivers of education". The role of teachers has shifted from an expert "guide" to a "coach" for skill learning, mobilizing students' creativity and initiative through equal interaction.

## **2.2. Important educational promotion organizations - social institutions**

The media literacy education for Canadian youth can be at the forefront of the world, and the various media literacy associations and media have played an indispensable role. Due to the particularity of Canadian educational institutions, policy communication on youth media literacy can only be negotiated by the provincial ministers of education and the council, which has affected the speed of development. Various media literacy associations and organizations have broken through regional restrictions and have strongly promoted the development of youth media literacy education in various provinces. At present, some of the more famous media literacy organizations in Canada mainly include the Media Literacy Association of Ontario, the Media Literacy Association of Quebec, and the Jesuit Communication Organization. The Media Literacy Association of Ontario was established in Toronto in 1978, emphasizing that media literacy is about "understanding and using the methods of mass media, helping students to cultivate a wise and critical understanding of the essential characteristics of mass media, the technologies used by mass media, and the impact of these technologies. More specifically, it is an education to improve students' understanding and appreciation of how the media operates, how it exerts influence, what its organizational structure is, and how it constructs reality." [1] The Media Literacy Association of Ontario has expanded the influence of Canadian media literacy education through various forms such as writing media literacy education series, holding teacher training classes, forming think tanks, and organizing media literacy summits, playing a very important role in the media literacy education of Canadian youth. The Media Literacy Association of Quebec was established in 1990, and the initial members were English and French teachers from middle schools. Unlike the Media Literacy Association of Ontario, the Media Literacy Association of Quebec is a grassroots media literacy organization, advocating that youth media literacy education should start from kindergarten and continue until the 11th grade. In order to promote youth media literacy education, the Media Literacy Association of Quebec has initiated Student Media Literacy Day, parent report meetings, and full-day media literacy workshops for teachers. Members of the association also regularly hold educational conferences and lectures at McGill University, actively providing a basis for the curriculum change plan of the Quebec Provincial Department of Education. The Jesuit Communication Organization is notably rich in media literacy resources. According to statistics, the Jesuit Communication Organization has more than 4,000 books, magazines, and other materials, which are not only open to Canada but also available for global use. In recent years, the Jesuit Communication Organization has actively cooperated with other institutions and has written many theoretical research series, "co-authored the 'Media Literacy Information Guide of Ontario' with the Media Literacy Association of Ontario; in 1999, co-authored 'Beyond Vision: Watching TV, Watching Ourselves' with John Pong and journalist Martin O' Malley, which is called a relaxed guide to media literacy." [2] The Jesuit Communication Organization uses its rich resources and actively organizes activities with other institutions, playing an important role in the media literacy education of Canadian youth.

## **2.3. The solid support of education - The Government**

In Canada, each provincial Ministry of Education has independent management rights over education in its province, and national educational issues are generally handled by the CMEC (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada). Although Canada does not have a national education department, with the joint efforts of professional organizations and related associations for media literacy education established with government approval, provincial government departments support youth media literacy education by

formulating a series of policies and regulations, incorporating media literacy education into the teaching system. In terms of formulating policies and regulations for youth media literacy education, Ontario is the most representative. In 1987, Ontario was the first to formulate policies to highlight youth media literacy education and included it in the school curriculum system, clearly defining the proportion and credit model of media literacy education in English language courses. In the following years, other provincial Ministries of Education in Canada successively included media literacy education in the curriculum system. Although different provinces have set different content for youth media literacy education, they all meet the basic requirements of the Canadian Media Literacy Association's standards. In 1995, Ontario published two documents on the implementation of education: the Media Literacy Public Curriculum Document and the Media Literacy Education Local Standards Document. The public curriculum document stipulates that the curriculum for grades 1 to 9 should include two issues: what students need to know and when they need to know it; the local standards document stipulates an objective evaluation of the quality of students' learning in media literacy courses, mainly including listening, speaking, writing, observing, and expressing, ensuring that media literacy has become a required part of students' curriculum from grade 1.

#### **2.4. A strong supplement to education - The Family**

Canadian families started later than schools and social organizations in the media literacy education of their children, and their role was not very obvious. However, with the development of youth media literacy education, some experts have also begun to emphasize the role of media literacy education in the family, and many parents have improved their ability to educate youth in media literacy through training forms such as summits and lectures. Most Canadian parents recognize that media literacy skills are one of the skills that children must master, and they regard providing a healthy media environment at home and cultivating children's correct media concepts as their important responsibilities. When children come into contact with media in their daily lives, parents can guide in time, teach children to analyze and use the media information they come into contact with, and improve children's ability to critically assess media information. For example, when children watch TV, parents can screen the program channels to avoid exposure to violent and pornographic content, ensuring that children are exposed to more healthy information; in terms of online media, Canadian parents set rules to restrict children from browsing inappropriate websites, not disclosing privacy online, not meeting online friends, and setting internet time limits, etc. It can be seen that Canadian families practice youth media literacy education differently from schools and social organizations, mainly adopting a permeating approach, which has played a good supplementary role to the rigid regulatory education model of schools and society. Practice has proved that the participation of Canadian family media literacy education has made the youth media literacy education system more perfect, forming a virtuous cycle system from school to family, and from class to after class.

### **3. Features of Canadian youth media literacy education**

#### **3.1. Rich implementation entities**

Schools, social organizations, governments, and families are crucial components of the successful media literacy education for Canadian youth. Schools and social organizations are the legs, the foundation; governments and families are the hands, the force for upward development. The predecessor of Canadian youth media literacy education was in the 1960s when some teachers became aware of the negative effects of screen content and spontaneously implemented "screen education." These teachers, deeply influenced by television during their growth, were highly sensitive to the impact of media messages and well understood the significant influence of mass media. As a result, they began to incorporate content that would enhance adolescents' abilities to discern media within their subjects. With the attention of communication scholars and educators, "screen education" gradually expanded into youth media literacy education. The associated theories grew, media literacy associations were established, various conferences were held, relevant resources were developed, and numerous books were published. As the government took notice, policies to safeguard youth media literacy were introduced one after another, establishing its place within the educational discipline, and forming a systematic and regular development for youth media literacy education. After the proportion of youth media literacy education increased in public awareness, families

also got involved, further perfecting the educational system. Schools, social organizations, governments, and families formed an effective synergy, ensuring the continuity and effectiveness of Canadian youth media literacy education, achieving the goal of equipping young people with self-identity and civic consciousness.

### **3.2. The curriculum is reasonably designed**

The media literacy curriculum for Canadian youth is very distinctive: "The curriculum objectives are phased and cyclically enhanced; the curriculum content emphasizes both critical thinking and creative production; the curriculum organization is flexible, equal, and multi-sourced, and the curriculum assessment standards focus on details with a six-level evaluation system." [3] The educational topics are extensive, including the role of media, violence and racial news, gender negotiations, advertising, and public relations, etc. To enhance the targeted nature of youth media literacy education, Canada has set different curriculum content and standards for different grades, subjects, and regions. Younger students focus on understanding information texts, aiming to integrate the concept of media critical thinking and recognize the false aspects of media; middle-grade students focus on understanding media forms, media communication skills, etc., to establish a sense of identity; older students turn to the media utilization stage, cultivating the ability to obtain effective information through media, leading the reception of information, and cultivating civic consciousness. At the beginning of Canada's youth media literacy education, only a small part was added to the English language class, but now it has been fully integrated into all courses. There are different manifestations in different course contents, such as analyzing the different meanings represented by the use of language and headlines in the English language class; guiding attention to reports on the environment and technology in science classes. There are also different standards in different regions. Ontario Province has rich resources, started earlier, and has unified standards for the youth media literacy education objectives in the province. Other provinces that developed later adopt a phased and cyclical approach to setting up courses, setting different teaching objectives according to student characteristics.

### **3.3. Emphasizing practical skills**

Canada places great importance on practical skills in the education of media literacy for youth. From the simple "screen education" at its inception to the increasingly refined system of youth media literacy education today, students have never been asked to simply memorize definitions or theoretical knowledge on how to improve skills. Instead, the content of youth media literacy is integrated into learning and life, focusing on cultivating practical abilities. For example, when studying the impact of American popular culture on Canadian culture, it is not just a review of history. Videos and audio materials of World War II are shown to students, allowing them to understand the influence of American culture on Canadian culture in a direct and visual way. In addition to exploring history, students are also organized to discuss the current American pop culture, such as television, movies, and songs, discussing why American pop culture is so popular and analyzing the political tendencies and intentions mixed in American pop culture. Many Canadian high schools not only adopt different methods for different courses but also develop media courses suitable for their region and school based on their own circumstances. For instance, South Glenville High School has a specific allocation of class hours for youth media literacy education, with two weeks dedicated to each of movies, the internet, television, and advertising, and three weeks for newspapers. The advertising and television units focus on cultivating students' awareness of creating programs; the internet and movie courses aim to improve students' abilities to create web pages and write film reviews independently; the newspaper unit starts with educating students about the structure of newspapers and creating mini newspapers. It is not difficult to see that Canada has always based youth media literacy education on practice, highlighting the cultivation of practical skills even in theory classes, helping young people to experience the characteristics of media in practice and strengthen their intuitive impressions.

## **4. Youth media literacy insights for our nation**

### **4.1. Enhance public awareness of media literacy education**

Compared to Canada, there is a significant gap in youth media literacy education in our country. Both parents and students, and even many teachers, have certain prejudices in their minds, thinking that youth media literacy education is dispensable and not as important as subjects like English, mathematics, and language that are tested. Many parents and teachers confine media to a narrow range of the internet, advertisements, cartoons, and games, considering them as a way for youth to rest when they are tired or bored from studying, without the need for explanation and analysis in the classroom, and even worrying that media literacy education will affect children's grades. From the development history of Canadian youth media literacy education, it is not difficult to see that Canadian citizens have had a high sense of identification with media literacy education from the beginning. In contrast, in our country, media literacy education is mostly regarded by scholars as a means to protect youth from the influence of negative information, with little thought given to cultivating youth's media literacy awareness and effective use of media information. Therefore, enhancing the media literacy awareness of our citizens is the foundational project to ensure the youth media literacy education. Especially teachers and parents should take the lead in learning and acting first. Teachers should establish a "guide" consciousness, starting with the publicity and promotion of youth media literacy education, changing traditional educational thoughts and models, integrating media information interpretation and other content into the curriculum in the classroom, and improving the thinking ability and knowledge structure of youth. With their own actions, they can change the prejudices of parents, students, and the general public, and recognize the important position of youth media literacy education in education. Parents should add educational content to family life when youth first come into contact with media, starting with cultivating good reading habits, guiding children to correctly understand and face the network, and avoiding the adverse effects of bloody and violent TV programs on youth.

### **4.2. Increase government support**

Youth media literacy education is a product of the rapid development of media and is a complex, long-term project that cannot be accomplished by a single department alone. Due to Canada's unique educational system, youth media literacy education began at the grassroots level and only after reaching a certain scale did the government get involved. The education plans of various provinces in our country are uniformly formulated by the Ministry of Education, which should have better conditions for implementing youth media literacy education. First, start by creating a favorable environment. According to the actual situation of the information age, where information updates quickly and is uneven, we should cooperate with other social departments to support youth media education work, making the whole society realize the important position of youth media literacy education in youth education. Secondly, we should "exert effort" in organizing education, especially the education department. It is necessary to recognize the inevitable trend of carrying out youth media literacy education, learn from the experience of our country's reform and opening up, learn from other countries, and formulate a media literacy plan suitable for our country. Pilot areas can be designated first, and youth media literacy education can be gradually carried out through methods such as tilting educational funds. Finally, relevant policies and regulations must be formulated. Governing the country according to law is also true for education. It is necessary to ensure that youth media literacy education has laws to follow. Youth media literacy education can be included in the education law or supplemented into other regulations to improve the enforcement of youth media literacy education. At the same time, it is necessary to organize the writing of teaching materials, guidelines, and other relevant materials to increase promotion efforts. In view of the national conditions of our country, due to the differences between urban and rural areas, coastal and inland areas, and the central and western regions, it is difficult for the central government to make unified regulations, and the time for setting up a separate youth media literacy course is not yet ripe. Each province can formulate youth literacy education regulations suitable for its own province according to the relevant requirements of the state, starting from courses such as English and language to gradually popularize youth media literacy education.

#### 4.3. Mobilize the strength of social groups

Relying solely on the government's enforcement and the efforts of scholars and experts to improve the quality of youth media literacy education is not enough; the participation of other social forces is also needed. The involvement of various media literacy associations and media in Canada's youth media literacy education is worth learning from. However, considering that Canada's media literacy education has developed from grassroots movements, which is a bottom-up model, and considering the reality that the strength of grassroots organizations in our country is still weak, the government could appoint or entrust certain institutions to implement youth media literacy education. This could leverage existing youth organizations or university research institutions, such as the Youth Development Foundation to promote youth media literacy education, and the establishment of youth media literacy education project teams in the journalism and communication departments of domestic universities, and for relevant experts and scholars to hold academic conferences, to stimulate research enthusiasm for youth media literacy education in the academic community. Online media, magazines, newspapers, radio, television, and other media should all play their functional roles. The internet, relying on educational websites, should provide a platform for communication among teachers, parents, and youth, improve online resources, and introduce experiences and practices. Other media should also use certain space to disseminate common sense of youth media literacy education. In particular, children's channels on television stations should develop some media education programs, allowing youth to subtly receive media literacy education during their leisure time.

#### 4.4. Emphasize practical application

Canada places great importance on the ability to independently identify and critically assess in youth media literacy education, enhancing practical application. Our country's youth media literacy education should also not be limited to improving the ability of young people to resist the negative aspects of popular culture. Instead, it should transform youth from "onlookers" to "participants" in media. Relevant organizations should provide relevant training for educators, publish instructional books, and improve teaching capabilities in practical aspects. Teachers on duty can undergo short-term training, regularly report on their teaching work during teaching, and schools should adjust plans and organize corresponding activities according to the situation, introducing good practices. Educational practice should step out of textbook teaching, using vivid audio-visual materials such as television, magazines, newspapers, movies, and advertisements to assist in teaching. Before teaching, let young people read or watch and think about problems during participation. When necessary, collect learning videos as cases and materials to ensure that young people have the ability of media literacy rather than just the ability to pass media literacy theory exams.

### 5. Conclusion

As globalization and informatization continue to deepen, media literacy education for adolescents has become increasingly important. The experience from Canada tells us that building an educational system involving schools, social organizations, governments, and families is key to success. Our country should learn from Canada's practices, starting with raising public awareness, and strengthen the practical abilities of youth media literacy through government guidance and extensive social participation. We should commit to creating a healthy and positive media environment, allowing adolescents to navigate freely in the ocean of information while maintaining clear judgment and creativity. Through these efforts, we hope to cultivate more youth with a global perspective, innovative spirit, and sense of social responsibility, contributing to building a better future.

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