Beyond the Book
Literacy in the Digital Age

Christopher Borawski

It goes without saying that children today find themselves sharing, using, and understanding information in ways that were unimaginable just a generation ago. Just as information has been constantly reformatted over time, so has the concept of literacy, and more specifically, information literacy. Now, as the twenty-first century rolls on, information literacy has begun its most recent transformation and, like books and music, it's gone digital.

Not so long ago, librarians and media specialists introduced young people to libraries through bibliographic instruction. All you had to know about were the Dewey Decimal System; author, title, and subject cards; and perhaps how to use *Reader's Guide*. Fast-forward just a few years and suddenly information is available at the stroke of a key or two through an array of databases. Bibliographic instruction now goes beyond the book, broadening to become information literacy. Words like *and*, *or*, and *not* take on a whole new importance in creating successful searches through an ever-widening sea of information.

Now, in the twenty-first century, children use computers and hop online for a multitude of purposes, like socializing, communicating, gaming, researching, and audiovisual enjoyment. To keep up with all this activity, information literacy has itself broadened to become digital literacy.

According to the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Literacy Panel, digital 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."[1] To put it more simply, to be digitally literate is to be able both to understand and effectively use the various sources of information and communication in the digital world.

At this year's ALA Annual Conference in Chicago, ALA and the Children's Book Council presented the program "Multiple Literacies in the Library," in which a series of panelists discussed several of the different forms that literacy takes today, including digital literacy. This presentation made it clear that children are being introduced to books and information more and more frequently via mediums other than traditional print. It's becoming increasingly important that children be able to use their listening skills (audio literacy) and their ability to discern information and reach conclusions from illustrations, photos, and so on (visual literacy).[2] Digital literacy is in some ways a bridge between these two, since one might need to be able to find and download an audio file to his or her MP3 player in order to listen, and since online information is often found with visual links and in visual form. (Have you helped a child use Google Images lately?)

Christopher Borawski is Senior Librarian and Assistant Branch Manager at the Montgomery County Public Libraries, Silver Spring (Md.) Library. He is the outgoing chair of the **ALSC Children and Technology Committee**, which also includes incoming Chair Amber Creger, Lauren Anduri, Natalie Arthur, Kelley Beeson, Jill Bickford, Jeannie Chen, Gretchen Hams-Casseroti, Patricia Havrin, Allison Kaplan, and Patty Saidenberg.

Research on digital literacy is still very much in its infancy; however, a 2002 study by the Education Development Center's (EDC) Center for Children and Technology along with Computers for Youth looked at the emergence of digital literacy skills in children from low- and middle-income families. Perhaps not surprisingly, it found that children's fluency in digital literacy was most affected by how frequently they had access to a computer and the Internet, how well their parents used and understood the technology, and the level of related instruction they received from teachers in school.[3] This is why it's important for librarians and media specialists to understand the skills that are a part of digital literacy and help children develop and strengthen them.

According to the EDC, digital literacy can be seen as a combination of five different skill areas.[4]

- **The ability to troubleshoot technical difficulties**. Do children know how to fix problems themselves, and if not, do they know who to ask or where to go for help? Do they simply ignore the problem and try to keep working?

- **The reasons for their computer use**. Do they use it for schoolwork, to play games, to communicate with friends, to do research, or some or all of the above?

- **The ability to use common tools**. This skill ranges from basic techniques like using a mouse or a keyboard, to navigating Windows or other operating systems, to using word processing and other software as well as using basic e-mail services and Internet search engines.

- **Their ability to communicate online**. How widely and completely do they use e-mail, instant messaging, Twitter, Facebook, or the chat function on their favorite game site (i.e. Club Penguin) to talk with their friends and family? Do they simply send text messages or can they add sound, videos, and photos to their messages?
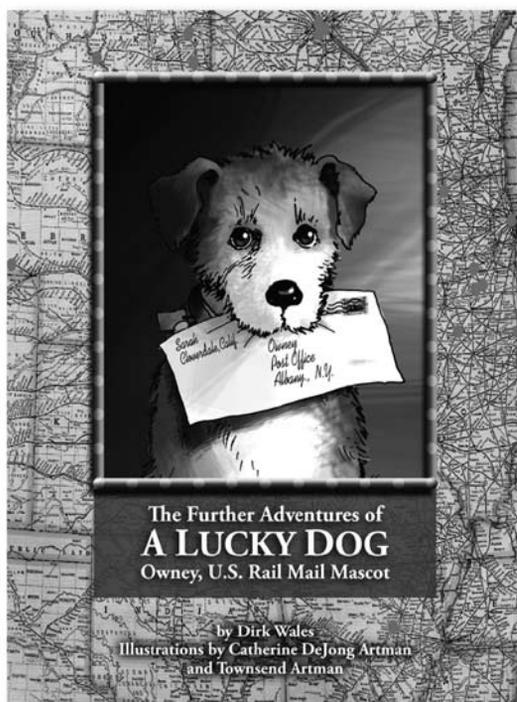
- **Web literacy**. How well do they use the Web to find or browse for information and evaluate what they find for accuracy and reliability? How well are they able to create and share their own material online (blogs, wikis, photos, etc.)?

We as librarians and media specialists are, as always, an important resource in building these digital literacy skills. We need only show parents and teachers how we can help. There are many ways in which these skills might be worked on in your library or media center.

Many libraries offer basic computer skills classes for children, but we can even go beyond that. How about a Web scavenger hunt to teach Web-searching skills or a digital photography workshop? Internet safety, appropriate online behavior, and plagiarism 2.0 (i.e. proper use of online images in school reports) are other areas where libraries can help support digital literacy. ♿

The Further Adventures of A Lucky Dog: Owney, U.S. Rail Mail Mascot

By Dirk Wales • Illustrated by Catherine DeJong Artman and Townsend Artman

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2. Mary Burkey, Timothy Ditlow, et al, "Multiple Literacies in the Library," (speech presented at the 2009 Annual Conference of the American Library Association, Chicago, July 13, 2009).
3. Harouna Ba, William Tally, and Kallen Tsikalas, "Investigating Children's Emerging Digital Literacies," *Journal of Technology, Learning, and Assessment* 1, no. 4 (Aug. 2002), http://escholarship.bc.edu/jtla/vol1/4/ (accessed July 29, 2009): 13.
4. Ibid, 6–8.

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