



Ferster, B. (2016). *Sage on the screen: Education, media, and how we learn*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University.

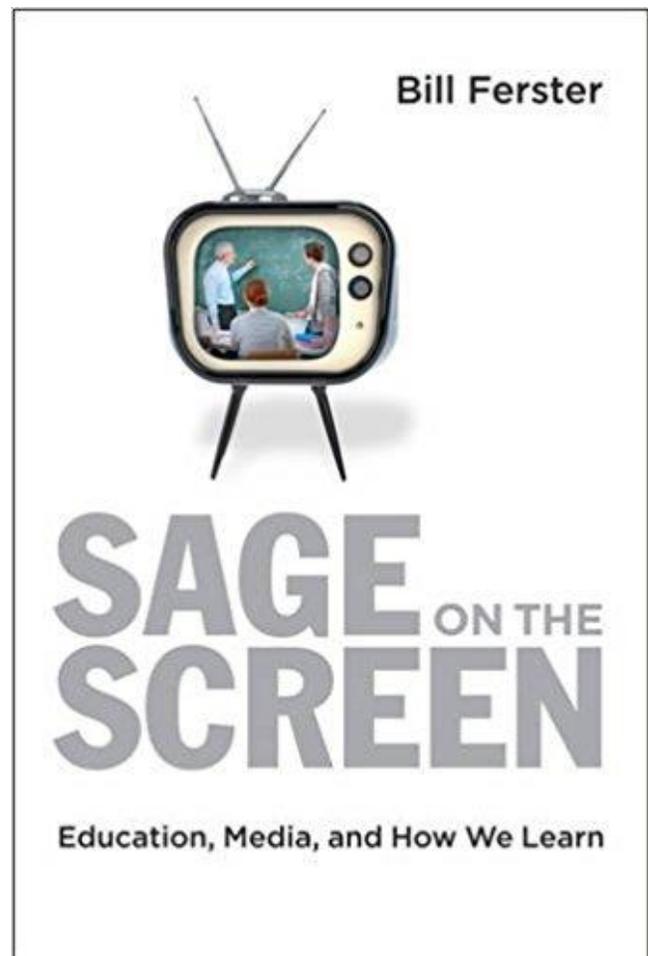
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**Reviewed by Jason D. DeHart**  
**The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**  
**United States**

Bill Ferster, research professor at the University of Virginia, begins his conversation about media in what might seem to be an appropriate point for readers who have looked into the historical development of media. In *Sage on the Screen: Education, Media, and How We Learn*, Ferster references Thomas Edison in the first line of the book's preface as a spark for what promises to be a sweeping overview of media over the past century. This use of Edison locates the book in its consideration of using media in classrooms and previews the holistic nature of Ferster's approach to the topic – beginning at the notion of the filmstrip and leading up to modern multimedia technologies. From this first reference, the rest of the book follows a biographical format, tracing the author's experiences with media in the classroom from the 1960s on.

Ferster informs us that the purpose of this book “is to explore how various media forms were created, how interrelated these forms were, and what impact they had in



education” (p. ix). Of course, an easy criticism might be that all media cannot be encapsulated and explored adequately in just under 200 pages. That said, Ferster does not position the book as an exhaustive or entirely comprehensive historical treatment of the media’s role in education, nor should it be considered in this way.

Following Bordwell, Thompson, and Smith’s (2017) text, grounding a consideration of film, in particular, and media, in general, starts appropriately with figures like Thomas Edison, who dared to conceive of film and its technological heirs as educational tools. From there, Ferster organizes the book according to particular types of media, including traditional media (radio, movies), interactive media (videodiscs), hypermedia (HyperCard, digital video), cloud media (streaming services, Kahn Academy), and immersive media (augmented reality). While I have provided one or two examples of each type of media discussed, each section goes into more detail and includes other examples, as well. The reader then finds a concise summary, which attempts to consider all these media together.

In the conclusion Ferster tells us, “Media in the classroom often changes the basic relationship between teacher and student,” an observation that echoes Bezemer and Kress’s (2016) elaboration on the political and hierarchical effects of exploring media, including allowing the user to become an active member of the creation process. Ferster’s emphasis on the importance of message throughout the text also brought to mind Hobbs’s (2007) similar focus on the analytical skills that can be practiced and shaped by using media in the classroom. Though theoretical and historical, *Sage on the Screen* consistently provides a sense of the practical and pedagogical.

A primary boon of this text is that it offers the reader a wider sense of the development of media over time, reaching back into concepts like persistence of vision,

that sense of illusion that allows moving pictures to exist, and particular examples of technology developed in the early days of film. Helpfully, the text includes illustrations and photographs to provide visualizations that accompany Ferster’s detailed descriptions. Readers who are interested in gaining a broad understanding of how media have come to be and how technology has changed over the years would do well to consult this book. Another take-away is the text’s deep look into more recent transformations in the world of media, including hypermedia, cloud media, and immersive media. With so many media platforms emerging each year, it is beneficial to be able to consider these developments side by side, and with a categorical approach that highlights their distinctions. What Ferster has done in this text is summarized media development up to this point, a discussion which has the potential to lend itself to a larger conversation about where media has been and where it is headed next.

The latter chapters are diverse in focus, but Ferster established a definitive starting point in each one that connects to an emergent form of technology that went on to shape other forms. In the case of hypermedia, for example, this series of transformations began with a clear explanation of the HyperCard, an Apple device that allowed users to “instantly show specific pages...releasing a world of information to be randomly accessed” (p. 71). These explanations, though technical, do not stray from their educational purpose into unnecessary and confusing details. In other words, the reader does not need an engineering or computer science background to appreciate what this text offers. Ferster’s concise use of examples helps to clear up what could be a muddy technical definition of what it means for a form of technology to essentially become clickable. The author presents this distinction with the clarity that only an example can provide, rather than bogging down the reader in a surplus of theoretical prefixes and new terms, a trap that

is easy to fall into when discussing developments in media, or even theoretical approaches to these developments.

The writing, then, is technical, yet accessible, and largely organized for most palatable reading by subheadings detailing the next technology or movement to be considered on the winding path of what is surely a forest of devices and platforms. Similarly, Ferster begins his consideration of cloud media by firmly grounding what he means by *cloud*, a computer process in which “vast amounts of digital resources...are stored on servers and made available to people anywhere in the world” (p. 104). The author goes on to say that this terminology is “somewhat overused” in its description of how computers work with the Internet (Ferster, 2016, p. 104). Ferster’s connection to the educational implications of cloud media, including distance learning, was especially effective.

Terms like “the flipped classroom” (p. 119) and examples of online educational tool providers like The Kahn Academy have gained prominence in the past few years, and are not so dated to seem out of context. As the author points out, “the Kahn Academy has issued over 600 million of [their] lessons, ranging from basic math to physics, biology, economics, computer science and more” (p. 120). Perhaps it is the recent and popular nature of virtual learning platforms, including augmented reality, that helps to convincingly establish this text as relevant. More information on augmented reality occurs later in the text as well. The tools are widely available and, in many cases, freely available, and they reach across content area boundaries.

In terms of the current field, the chapter on immersive media perhaps paints the best picture of where we are now and where we are headed: media that concerns itself with realistic representations of the world. This technological movement is grounded first in the theoretical shoulders of

Papert (1993). Ferster aptly reminds the reader about the importance of the past in this discussion, even as he considers developmental technology. Beyond entertainment applications, the chapter on immersive media describes online immersive spaces (Second Life is the chief example provided in this instance) and augmented reality. For the practitioner looking for lesson plans, thematic units, and quick ties to media in classroom planning, another resource may serve more adequately. The book is hardly a guidebook for quick and easy applications of technology in the classroom, but acts more as a positional work, more generally advocating for the use of media in education. That said, this book would be an asset to instructors at the K-12 level, as well as those in the world of higher education.

This text leaves us to ponder the question of whether media ultimately possesses value as an education instrument. For the field of literacy, this is yet another text to undergird the importance of adeptly navigating online and technological spaces. This concern aligns with Postman’s (1985) emphasis on how we view. It seems, these days, viewing no longer appears to be optional. To echo Hobbs (2007) again, our viewing must be critical and focus on the messages that are offered through the variety of platforms and modes that are available to us. This is a lesson sorely needed in our current age of information and supposed misinformation, and one that students desperately need to hear. Ferster adds to this conversation with his text, underscoring the importance of incorporating a wide variety of media into education, moving our instruction to typographical and post-typographic forms in a world that relies increasingly on screens rather than pages. This conversation is important for the teacher-educator, as well as the teacher.

*Sage on the Screen* notably succeeds in providing what amounts to a professional, informed overview of multiple platforms and

examples of media throughout history. With so much to explore, apart from a multi-volume set, how could a text deeply describe and explore as many types of media as are presented here? There is more to explore in the world and media and this text begins that conversation in a thought-provoking way. The appeal of the text is two-fold. For scholars, this work serves as a means of becoming acquainted very quickly with a vast array of technological movements and might stimulate a more devoted interest to a singular form of media. For educators, this book can serve as a stimulus for thinking about the wide range of media that can make learning accessible and engaging for students.

While *Sage on the Screen* is not comprehensive, it provides a thoughtful, well-researched timeline of where media has been, while raising questions of the next steps for exploring media for educational uses (specifically in immersive media, including augmented reality). As such, Ferster offers a text that invites researchers and educators to continue the conversations about how media might connect most effectively with students. With changes constantly happening in the world of technology, this is a dialogue that will no doubt continue and expand into even more formats as time passes.

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## About the Reviewer

**Jason D. DeHart** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. DeHart's concentration is Literacy Studies with a specialty in Reading and his research interest is engaging adolescent learners with media.



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