Every image sheds light on the assumptions of the day. Every image reveals, as well as defines, events. Every image must be read, must be interpreted. This is a perilous act, one that often leads us far away from the safe ground sought by most historians. Yet reading the image, like reading any text, is a way to engage the past and connect it to our lives.

Louis Masur, Historian

PART ONE – A Landscape for Understanding Visual Literacy

1. The Age of Participation

We like to categorize and name things. Naming helps us to create meaning about ourselves and our role in the world. The naming of our times has followed a rich lineage starting with the Hunter/Gatherer Age, moving to the Agriculture Age, the Industrial Age, and most recently leading us to the Information Age. The Information Age has defined much of what we do in our professions for the last several decades, and most library and information science practice derives from notions of the Information Age. However, we are now faced with a changing world of information and services, one that potentially goes beyond information. Can we still characterize our times as the Information Age? The answer to that question has an influence on both user expectations and our role as information professionals, especially as we examine the skills and competencies the current age requires, among them visual literacy.

There is no shortage of theorists trying to determine the answer to the question of what to name the current era in which we live, floating names such as the Web 2.0 Age,² the Conceptual Age,³ and the Age of Participation.⁴ The Information Age, as we know it, began in the mid-twentieth century when the economic base of much of the world shifted from the production of physical goods (Industrial Age) to the production and manipulation of data or information. This shift really took hold in the mid-1980s with the development of the personal computer and blossomed further in the 1990s with widespread development and adoption of the Internet. Just a decade after what many are now calling Web 1.0, a potential new age is upon us.

The Information Age and associated Web 1.0 era is being eclipsed by a new Web 2.0 era. In 2004, Tim O’Reilly coined the buzzword Web 2.0 to describe a trend in the use of Web technology that aims to create communities for information sharing and collaboration. Also emphasized in the Web 2.0 world is creativity on the part of the users, or a desire and ability to contribute as well as consume. This means a world where the flow of information is a two-way rather than a one-way street, where receivers of information are no longer passive consumers but active contributors. These Web 2.0 concepts have led to the development of online communities and social networking Web sites such as Facebook, Flickr, MySpace, and Wikipedia, and more generally, applications such as wikis, blogs, and folksonomies.

Another theorist, Daniel Pink, has written in Wired Magazine and a book entitled A Whole New Mind about what he calls the Conceptual Age. He argues that as a result of outsourcing white collar or Information Age jobs to Asia, a general abundance of wealth and cheap goods, and the automation of number-crunching activities, we are moving from a left-brain dominant society to a right-brain society. In essence, creativity, emotion, and synthesis are in vogue:

The Information Age we all prepared for is ending. Rising in its place is what I call the Conceptual Age, an era in which mastery of abilities that we’ve often overlooked and undervalued marks the fault line between who gets ahead and who falls behind... In a world propelled by outsourcing, deluged with data, and choked with choices, the abilities that matter most are now closer in spirit to the specialties of the right hemisphere—artistry, empathy, seeing the big picture, and pursuing the transcendent.⁵

Therefore, according to Pink, our former linear world of information is changing. New abilities and new skills sets are perhaps not only valued but necessary in our current age.

A final way of characterizing our age, and one that particularly relates both to our times and the concept of visual literacy, is the Age of Participation. Jonathan Swartz describes the Age of Participation, which incorporates aspects of both the theories of Web 2.0 and the Conceptual Age, as follows:

The old flow of information has been disrupted and an open and competitive network fuels growing opportunities for everyone—not simply to draw data or shift work around the world, but to participate, to create value and independence. If the Information Age was passive, the Participation Age is active.⁶

This focus on active users is essential to an understanding of our age. The existence of active, creative users willing to engage in the process of information creation presents new challenges and opportunities for information professionals. Across functional areas, librarianship is moving away from more controlled, passive, and didactic modes in which, rather than users seeking