



Media Literacy Key Concepts

Media educators base their teaching on key concepts and principles of media literacy. These concepts provide an effective foundation for examining mass media and popular culture.

Eight Key Concepts for Media Literacy

1. All media are construction

The media do not present simple reflections of external reality. Rather, they present carefully crafted constructions that reflect many decisions and result from many determining factors. Media Literacy works towards deconstructing these constructions, taking them apart to show how they are made.



John Pungente, S.J.

2. The media construct reality

The media are responsible for the majority of the observations and experiences from which we build up our personal understandings of the world and how it works. Much of our view of reality is based on media messages that have been pre-constructed and have attitudes, interpretations and conclusions already built in. The media, to a great extent, give us our sense of reality.

3. Audiences negotiate meaning in the media

The media provide us with much of the material upon which we build our picture of reality, and we all "negotiate" meaning according to individual factors: personal needs and anxieties, the pleasures or troubles of the day, racial and sexual attitudes, family and cultural background, and so forth.

4. Media have commercial implications

Media Literacy aims to encourage an awareness of how the media are influenced by commercial considerations, and how these affect content, technique and distribution. Most media production is a business, and must therefore make a profit. Questions of ownership and control are central: a relatively small number of individuals control what we watch, read and hear in the media.

5. Media contain ideological and value messages

All media products are advertising, in some sense, in that they proclaim values and ways of life. Explicitly or implicitly, the mainstream media convey ideological messages about such issues as the nature of the good life, the virtue of consumerism, the role of women, the acceptance of authority, and unquestioning patriotism.

6. Media have social and political implications

The media have great influence on politics and on forming social change. Television can greatly influence the election of a national leader on the basis of image. The media involve us in concerns such as civil rights issues, famines in Africa, and the AIDS epidemic. They give us an intimate sense of national issues and global concerns, so that we become citizens of Marshall McLuhan's "Global Village."

7. Form and content are closely related in the media

As Marshall McLuhan noted, each medium has its own grammar and codifies reality in its own particular way. Different media will report the same event, but create different impressions and messages.

8. Each medium has a unique aesthetic form

Just as we notice the pleasing rhythms of certain pieces of poetry or prose, so we ought to be able to enjoy the pleasing forms and effects of the different media.

Source: John Pungente, S.J. From Barry Duncan et al. *Media Literacy Resource Guide*, Ontario Ministry of Education, Toronto, ON, Canada, 1989.

Key Concepts for Media Education

ANALYSIS FOR MEDIA PRODUCTION

Purpose: People make media messages to inform, entertain, and/or persuade for political, commercial, educational, artistic, moral and/or other purposes.

Values: Media messages communicate explicit and implicit values.

Representation: Media messages are constructed—they are only representations of real or imaginary worlds.

Codes, conventions and characteristics: Each medium has its own set of codes, conventions and characteristics that affect the way messages are transmitted and understood.

Production: People who understand the media are better able to make purposeful media messages.



Dan Blake

AUDIENCE INTERPRETATION AND INFLUENCE

Interpretation: Audience members bring their knowledge, experience and values to their interpretation of, and emotional responses to, media messages.

Influence of media on audience: Media messages can influence people's attitudes, behaviour and values.

Influence of audience on media: People can influence media institutions and the messages they produce and transmit.

MEDIA AND SOCIETY

Control: People who control a society's dominant institutions have disproportionate influence on the construction and dissemination of media messages and the values they contain.

Scope: Media technologies influence and are influenced by the political, economic, social and intellectual dimensions of societies.

Source: British Columbia Association for Media Education (BCAME).

Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions for Media Literacy



As part of its *CML MediaLit Kit*, the Center for Media Literacy has developed a series of five key concepts for media literacy education, and five key questions that correspond to each of these concepts.

Five Core Concepts

1. All media messages are constructed.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
3. Different people experience the same messages differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power.

Five Key Questions

1. Who created this message?
2. What techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently from me?
4. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message?
5. Why was this message sent?

Source: Center for Media Literacy (CML).

[What Is Media Literacy?](#)

[Why Teach Media Literacy?](#)

[Approaches to Media Education](#)

Key Concepts

[Evaluation and Assessment](#)

Media Investigations

Specific Tools for Analysis

SYMBOLS are larger than reality, usually emotional, *idea-conveyances*; symbols can be words, designs, places, ideas, music, etc. They can symbolize tradition, nationalism, power, religion, sex or any emotional concept. The fundamental principle of persuasion is to rub the emotional content of one thing onto another. Thus, a beautiful woman can be used on TV to promote lust, romance, killing of police, or *Snickers'* nutrition.

HYPERBOLE is exaggeration or "hype." **Glittering generalities** is a subset of hype that utilizes impressive language. Vague and meaningless, it leaves the target impressed emotionally and, therefore, more susceptible to the next sales pitch. For example, "The greatest automobile advance of the century..."

DEFENSIVE NATIONALISM uses fear (usually of an enemy) although it can be a political opponent sickness or any threat. For example, calling statements "McCarthyism" or "communism" brings up fear of demagogues and dictatorship.

SCAPEGOATING is a powerful subset of defensive nationalism that blames many problems upon one person, group, race, religion, etc.

HUMOR is a powerful emotion. If you can make people laugh, you can persuade them.

LIES work--on cereals boxes, ads and on television "news." Most people want to believe what they see. According to Hitler, people are more suspicious of a small lie than a large one.

"MAYBE, MIGHT, AND COULD" can make outrageous claims are fine. Listen to infomercials.

TESTIMONIALS use famous people or respected institutions to sell a person, idea or product. They don't need to have nothing in common. A dangerous trend: We seem to be increasingly conditioned to accept illogic as fact

REPETITION drives the message home many times. Even unpleasant ads work. Chevy trucks are "like a rock," and smoking Marlboro can make you tough and independent (Fact: it used to be a cigarette for girls.)

PLAIN FOLKS RHETORIC is popular with advertisers and politicians: it's the strategy of promoting oneself or one's products as being of humble origins, common--one of the gals/guys. Unfortunately, plain folks reinforces anti-intellectualism (a common tendency of all electronic media), implying that to be "common" is good (an' hit ain't, dude, ya no?)

FUHRERPRINZIP means "leadership principle." (The term was first used in this manner by Josef Goebbels.) The idea is basically "Be firm, bold, strong; have dramatic confidence." Many cultural icons emphasize the strong, yet plain, superhero (for example Clint Eastwood, Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger). Some think this role

modeling leads to a great deal of male aloneness, and, perhaps, less ability to cooperate. The strategy is frequently combined with plain folks.

AD HOMINEM is name calling. It can be direct or delicately indirect. Audiences love it. Our violent, aggressive, sexual media teaches us from an early age to love to hear dirt. (Just tune in to afternoon talk TV). Name calling is frequently combined with hype, truth, lies, etc. Remember, all is fair in love, war, political dirty tricks and advertising, and suing for libel is next to impossible!

FLATTERY is telling or implying that the members of your target audience are something that makes them feel good or, often, *what they want to be*. And, I am sure that someone as brilliant as yourself will easily understand this technique.

BRIBERY seems to give something desirable. We humans tend to be greedy. Buy a taco; get free fries.

DIVERSION occurs when one seems to tackle a problem or issue, but, then, throws in an emotional non-sequitur or distraction. **Straw man** is a subset that builds up an illogical (or deliberately damaged) idea which one presents as something that one's opposition supports or represents. Then one proceeds to attack this idea, reducing one's opponent.

DENIAL is the practice of avoiding attachment to unpopular things; it can be direct or indirect. An example of indirect denial was when Dukakis said, "Now I could use George Bush's Willie Horton tactics* and talk about a furloughed federal (the President's jurisdiction) prisoner who brutally raped a mother of five children, *but I would not do that.*"

CARD STACKING is using statements or facts in a context that gives a false and/or misleading impression--telling only part of the story. Read the quotations from the critic's in any movie ad.

BANDWAGON is the persuasive strategy that says "everyone is doing it." It plays upon the universal loneliness of humankind. In America with our incredible addiction to sports, it is often accompanied by the concept of winning. "Wear Marlboro gear."

SIMPLE SOLUTIONS avoid complexities (unless selling to intellectuals). This strategy attaches many problems to one solution.

"SCIENTIFIC" EVIDENCE uses the paraphernalia of science (charts, etc.) for "proof," which often is bogus. A classic example is Chevy's truck commercial chart of vehicles on the road after ten years.

GROUP DYNAMICS replaces that "I" weakness with "we" strength. Concert, audiences, rallies, pep rallies..

RHETORICAL QUESTIONS get the target "agreeing," saying "yes," building trust; then try to sell them.

NOSTALGIA is the idealization of and longing for the past. A nostalgic setting can

make a product seem more attractive. *Forrest Gump!*

TIMING can be as simple as planning your sell for when your target is tired. In sophisticated propaganda it is the organization of multiple techniques in a pattern or strategy that increases the emotional impact of the sell.

[top]

This module created by Jill Brown, Clint Fisher, Kd D'Port, and Fred Lackey, RETA instructors.

Questions To Ask About Media Messages

"At the heart of media literacy is the principle of inquiry."
Elizabeth Thoman, Skills & Strategies for Media Literacy

1. Who is the producer/storyteller of the message?
2. What is their purpose/motive/agenda?
(to inform, to persuade, to educate, to call to action, to entertain, to shock)
3. Who is the intended (primary) target audience?
How do you know? Is there another (secondary) audience?
4. What does the message say? How does it say it?
5. How do you know what the message means?
6. What format/medium does the producer use?
7. What are the advantages of the format/medium?
8. What methods/techniques does the producer use to make the message attractive/believable?
9. What lifestyle is portrayed in the message? What clues tell you ?
10. Who makes money or benefits from the message?
([Follow the Money Trail activity here](#))
11. Who/what is left out of the message?
12. Whose interests are served by telling/showing the message in a particular way?
13. Do you agree with the message?
14. How might different people interpret the message differently?
15. What do you know; what do you NOT know; What would you like to know?
16. Where can you go to verify the information or get more reliable

information?

17. What can you do with the information you have obtained from the message?

Source: some of the above is derived from a curriculum entitled KNOW TV and from previously published works.

Conceptual Framework for Media Education

By Chris Worsnop

Media Image	Questions to Ask
Industry	Who's in charge? What do they want of me, and why? What else do they want? HOW DO I KNOW?
Product	What kind of text is this? Are conventions followed or broken? How is this message constructed? HOW DO I KNOW?
Audience	Who is this intended for? What assumptions does the text make about the audience? Who am I supposed to be in relation to this text? HOW DO I KNOW?
Values	How real is this text? How/where do I find the meaning? What values are presented? What is the commercial message? What is the ideology of this text? What social/artistic/political messages does the text contain? HOW DO I KNOW?
Predisposition	Do I agree with (assent to) this text's message? Do I disagree with (resist) this text's message? Do I argue/negotiate with the message of this text? HOW DO I KNOW?
Perception	How does the text fit my personal values/beliefs/ideology? How does the text relate to my personal needs/hopes/fears/experiences? HOW DO I KNOW?

Skills	What skills do I need to apply to this text? How do I deconstruct/reconstruct this text? What new skills does this text demand of me? HOW DO I KNOW?
Receiver	What does all this mean in the end? HOW DO I KNOW?

What really counts in the end is what we make of the text. All learning is an act of construction.

Source: © Chris Worsnop, 1999. Adapted by the author from *Screening Images: Ideas for Media Education*. Wright Communications, 1994. Original post at: http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/teaching_backgrounders/media_literacy/conceptual_framework_worsnop.cfm?RenderForPrint=1