

Media Literacy Concepts

The study and practice of media literacy is based on a number of fundamental concepts about media messages, our media system, and the role of media literacy in bringing about change. Understanding these concepts is an essential first step in media literacy education.

We've organized Media Literacy Concepts into three levels: Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. Basic concepts focus on how media affect us. Intermediate concepts examine more closely how we create meaning from media messages. Advanced concepts examine the interaction of media and society, and the role of media literacy in bringing about change.

Basic concepts

- 1. Media construct our culture.** Our society and culture – even our perception of reality - is shaped by the information and images we receive via the media. A few generations ago, our culture's storytellers were people – family, friends, and others in our community. For many people today, the most powerful storytellers are television, movies, music, video games, and the Internet.
- 2. Media messages affect our thoughts, attitudes and actions.** We don't like to admit it, but all of us are affected by advertising, news, movies, pop music, video games, and other forms of media. That's why media are such a powerful cultural force, and why the media industry is such big business.
- 3. Media use “the language of persuasion.”** All media messages try to persuade us to believe or do something. News, documentary films, and nonfiction books all claim to be telling the truth. Advertising tries to get us to buy products. Novels and TV dramas go to great lengths to appear realistic. To do this, they use specific techniques (like flattery, repetition, fear, and humor) we call “the language of persuasion.”
- 4. Media construct fantasy worlds.** While fantasy can be pleasurable and entertaining, it can also be harmful. Movies, TV shows, and music videos sometimes inspire people to do things that are unwise, anti-social, or even dangerous. At other times, media can inspire our imagination. Advertising constructs a fantasy world where all problems can be solved with a purchase. Media literacy helps people to recognize fantasy and constructively integrate it with reality.
- 5. No one tells the whole story.** Every media maker has a point of view. Every good story highlights some information and leaves out the rest. Often, the effect of a media message comes not only from what is said, but from what part of the story is not told.
- 6. Media messages contain “texts” and “subtexts.”** The text is the actual words, pictures and/or sounds in a media message. The subtext is the hidden and underlying meaning of the message.
- 7. Media messages reflect the values and viewpoints of media makers.** Everyone has a point of view. Our values and viewpoints influence our choice of words, sounds and images we use to communicate through media. This is true for all media makers, from a preschooler's crayon drawing to a media conglomerate's TV news broadcast.
- 8. Individuals construct their own meanings from media.** Although media makers attempt to convey specific messages, people receive and interpret them differently, based on their own prior knowledge and experience, their values, and their beliefs. This means that people can create different subtexts from the same piece of media. All meanings and interpretations are valid and should be respected.

9. Media messages can be decoded. By “deconstructing” media, we can figure out who created the message, and why. We can identify the techniques of persuasion being used and recognize how media makers are trying to influence us. We notice what parts of the story are not being told, and how we can become better informed.

10. Media literate youth and adults are active consumers of media. Many forms of media – like television – seek to create passive, impulsive consumers. Media literacy helps people consume media with a critical eye, evaluating sources, intended purposes, persuasion techniques, and deeper meanings.

Intermediate concepts

11. The human brain processes images differently than words. Images are processed in the “reptilian” part of the brain, where strong emotions and instincts are also located. Written and spoken language is processed in another part of the brain, the neocortex, where reason lies. This is why TV commercials are often more powerful than print ads.

12. We process time-based media differently than static media. The information and images in TV shows, movies, video games, and music often bypass the analytic brain and trigger emotions and memory in the unconscious and reactive parts of the brain. Only a small proportion surfaces in consciousness. When we read a newspaper, magazine, book or website, we have the opportunity to stop and think, re-read something, and integrate the information rationally.

13. Media are most powerful when they operate on an emotional level. Most fiction engages our hearts as well as our minds. Advertisements take this further, and seek to transfer feelings from an emotionally-charged symbol (family, sex, the flag) to a product.

14. Media messages can be manipulated to enhance emotional impact. Movies and TV shows use a variety of filmic techniques (like camera angles, framing, reaction shots, quick cuts, special effects, lighting tricks, music, and sound effects) to reinforce the messages in the script. Dramatic graphic design can do the same for magazine ads or websites.

15. Media effects are subtle. Few people believe everything they see and hear in the media. Few people rush out to the store immediately after seeing an ad. Playing a violent video game won't automatically turn you into a murderer. The effects of media are more subtle than this, but because we are so immersed in the media environment, the effects are still significant.

16. Media effects are complex. Media messages directly influence us as individuals, but they also affect our families and friends, our communities, and our society. So some media effects are indirect. We must consider both direct and indirect effects to understand media's true influence.

17. Media convey ideological and value messages. Ideology and values are usually conveyed in the subtext. Two examples include news reports (besides covering an issue or event, news reports often reinforce assumptions about power and authority) and advertisements (besides selling particular products, advertisements almost always promote the values of a consumer society).

18. We all create media. Maybe you don't have the skills and resources to make a blockbuster movie or publish a daily newspaper. But just about anyone can snap a photo, write a letter or sing a song. And new technology has allowed millions of people to make media--email, websites, videos, newsletters, and more -- easily and cheaply. Creating your own media messages is an important part of media literacy.

Advanced concepts

19. Our media system reflects the power dynamics in our society. People and institutions with money, privilege, influence, and power can more easily create media messages and distribute them to large numbers of people. People without this access are often shut out of the media system.

20. Most media are controlled by commercial interests. In the United States, the marketplace largely determines what we see on television, what we hear on the radio, what we read in newspapers or magazines. As we use media, we should always be alert to the self-interest of corporate media makers. Are they concerned about your health? Do they care if you're smart or well-informed? Are they interested in creating active participants in our society and culture, or merely passive consumers of their products, services, and ideas?

21. Media monopolies reduce opportunities to participate in decision making. When a few huge media corporations control access to information, they have the power to make some information widely available and privilege those perspectives that serve their interests, while marginalizing or even censoring other information and perspectives. This affects our ability to make good decisions about our own lives, and reduces opportunities to participate in making decisions about our government and society.

22. Changing the media system is a justice issue. Our media system produces lots of negative, demeaning imagery, values and ideas. It renders many people invisible. It provides too little funding and too few outlets for people without money, privilege, influence, and power to tell their stories.

23. We can change our media system. More and more people are realizing how important it is to have a media system that is open to new people and new perspectives, that elevates human values over commercial values, and that serves human needs in the 21st century. All over the world, people are taking action to reform our media system and create new alternatives.

24. Media literate youth and adults are media activists. As we learn how to access, analyze and interpret media messages, and as we create our own media, we recognize the limitations and problems of our current media system. Media literacy is a great foundation for advocacy and activism for a better media system.