

Media Literacy Key Concepts

"Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and produce communication through a variety of forms."

Definition of the Aspen Institute National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, 1992

1. All media are CONSTRUCTIONS.

Media are mediated communication. They are not "slices of life," "windows on the world," or "mirrors of society." They are carefully manufactured constructs with nothing left to chance. They are not, by definition, "real," although they attempt to imitate reality. The success of these manufactured constructs lies in their apparent naturalness.

2. All media construct REALITY.

Although media are not real, they can shape our attitudes, behavior and ideas about the world. The WWII broadcaster, Walter Lippman called it "the world outside and the pictures in our heads." If we haven't had first-hand experience with a person, place or thing and yet we feel we know something about it based on media information, then media has constructed a form of reality for us.

3. AUDIENCES negotiate meaning in media.

Audiences are not passive entities. We may look passive as we sit motionless in front of a book or a TV, but our minds are working to make sense of the information. This is especially true of fast-paced modern media. We learn to anticipate the codes and conventions in media and to somehow "read" or make meaning of its message. We do this as individuals and in predictable ways, as groups. Our taste in media content and forms changes as we age. Advertisers know this and try to target us as individuals and as audiences.

4. Media have COMMERCIAL implications.

Media industries add billions of dollars to economies and are one of the United States' largest exports. In addition to the business generated by media commodities, spin-off products and services that rely on media industries generate billions more. Commercial factors such as distribution, technical costs, labor costs, ownership and potential ad sales influence content. Advertisers are guaranteed a number of consumers who will see their ads and who they target to buy products. Advertising drives media businesses. The commodity that is bought and sold is the audience. Our challenge is to educate ourselves about media industries and the way that they are intertwined with modern economic systems. We can learn to question the economic decisions that influence the content of a media product and to become aware of the place of media industries in the overall economy.

5. Media contain IDEOLOGICAL and VALUE messages.

Objectivity and balance are journalistic ideals, but media are not value free. The notion of objectivity in media is a relatively new idea. Until the first part of the Twentieth Century, audiences did not expect media to be objective. They knew the “Republican” newspapers or the “Democrat” magazine and generally bought them, according to their own ideological persuasion. Media content that purports to be objective can hide explicit and implicit values and ideology. Most modern media content maintains a social status quo or “sells” a consumer lifestyle.

6. Media have SOCIAL and POLITICAL implications.

Media have irrevocably altered the landscape of modern political campaigning. Media not only seek to sell us products, but they also sell us political candidates, ideas, public health messages, and seek to shape audiences into political constituencies. Media technologies have altered our culture, our families and the way we use leisure time. Although they may not directly affect the way we behave, media seek to legitimize and reinforce social and political behavior.

7. Media have UNIQUE AESTHETIC FORMS that are closely related to CONTENT.

People derive great pleasure from their use of media and media literacy skills can heighten that pleasure. We can appreciate the artistry of texts, technical feats and creative vision. We can understand that form and content are closely related in media and that each medium has unique codes, conventions, benefits and limitations that influence its content.

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