

## Media Literacy | Basic concepts

### **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, pop music, video games and the Internet.

### **Media messages affect our thoughts 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.

### **Media effects are subtle.**

Few people believe everything they see and hear in the media. No one rushes 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.

### **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.

### **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.”

### **Media construct fantasy worlds.**

While fantasy can be pleasurable and entertaining, it can also be harmful. Movies, TV shows and pop songs 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.

### **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.

### **Media messages contain “texts” and “subtexts”.**

The text is the actual words, pictures and/or sounds in a media message. The subtext is the *meaning* of the message. Example: The text of a magazine ad for McDonald's

may include a picture of a happy family, an ad slogan, and the McDonald's logo. The subtext may be: *I'll be happy if I eat at McDonald's.*

**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.

**Media convey ideological and value messages.**

Ideology and values are usually conveyed in the subtext. Two examples: News reports, besides covering an issue or event, often reinforce assumptions about power and authority. Advertisements, besides selling particular products, almost always promote the values of a consumer society.

**The human brain processes images differently than words.**

Images are processed in the so-called "reptilian" part of the brain, where strong emotions and instincts are also located. Written and spoken language is processed in the cerebral cortex, where reason lies. Is it any wonder that a TV commercial is more powerful than a newspaper ad?

**We process time-based media differently than static media.**

The information and images in TV shows, movies, video games and music often bypasses the analytic brain and triggers 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, or book -- or text on a website -- we have the opportunity to stop and think, re-read something, and integrate the information rationally.

**Media are most powerful when they operate on an emotional level.**

Most fiction seeks to engage 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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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 make a poster or 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.

**Our media system reflects the power dynamics in our society.**

People and institutions with money, privilege and power can more easily create media messages and distribute them to large numbers of people. The rest of us are often shut out of the media system.

**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 and services?

**Media monopolies threaten democracy.**

In a democracy, we need access to information from a wide variety of sources, so we can make our own decisions. When a few huge media corporations control that access, democracy is endangered.

**Media reform is a justice issue.**

Our media system produces lots of negative, demeaning imagery. It renders many people invisible. It provides too little funding and too few outlets for people without money, privilege and power to tell their stories.

**We can reform 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 21<sup>st</sup> century. All over the world, people are taking action to reform our media system and create new alternatives.

**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.