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Media Literacy

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Media literacy serves the discipline of mass communication research methodology in numerous and diverse ways. Media literacy includes the acquired skills needed to develop awareness of media use or exposure and analyze media messages with an understanding of social/cultural context and effects. This holistic method includes media's use of persuasion and social change strategies. Understanding media begins by developing consciousness about media consumption—the personal choices and habits of audiences. Once audiences honestly record and reflect on their own consumption habits, they become aware of immense time spent with media, and the potential influence such messages have in their everyday lives. Media literacy includes understanding how the communication industries are structured, how they create media content with specific intents, and how messages operate across diverse audiences. By understanding media message strategies, audiences/users understand larger social knowledge structures within political, cultural, and economic contexts. Finally, media literacy is about citizens creating alternative media to influence beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors within the critical, democratic process.

This entry focuses on media literacy as a multiperspectival approach. Media literacy includes intersecting methodological branches within the complex system of mediated communication. Media literacy initially started as an educational and curricular initiative, inviting teachers and their students to reflect on their media use, habits, and patterns. Media literacy invites citizens to critically interpret media messages, understanding these messages in greater depth and context. Through this, audiences understand how meaning is created within media forms and through genre conventions, which are then disseminated through powerful multinational media corporations, local/regional media organizations, or by individuals via newer media technologies. Media literacy is also about the credibility of sources, recognizing stereotypes, oversimplification, generalizing and bias, as well as the maintenance of power among media organizations. Media-literate consumers recognize the strong social influence of media in everyday life. More recently, media literacy acknowledges the importance of citizens creating their own media messages for circulation. Citizen-producers employ media literacy competence in their consumption, understanding, and creation of messages. Thus, media literacy works on within any of the following contexts:

- 1.
  Media literacy as education curriculum starts with discovering consumption habits and the potential effects media messages have on users.
- 2.
  Media literacy explores the grammar of media through analysis of messages, recognizing that all media messages are constructed. Each media text, and the medium through which it is distributed, have different characteristics and unique visual/aural/spatial/interactive genre structures.
- 3.
  The political economy of media focuses on research about media content creators, as well as how media laws (policy) influence content and distribution. Literacy develops by exploring who creates mediated message, and for what purpose within a larger political and economic context.
- 4.

Acquiring the skills to produce diverse media such as video, audio, or interactive web design develops maturity in media literacy. This methodology includes knowledge of research, script writing, preproduction planning, and visualization as well as navigation in interactive media forms (e.g., websites or games).

Media literacy was initially recognized as a curriculum initiative. Thus, media literacy was synonymous with media education to develop critical and reflective analysis. Ownership of media became an issue when deregulation changed regarding who could own media companies and how many. Media literacy matured into a social movement empowering citizens to create their own media. Since media literacy addresses the juncture of message creation, consumption, economics, policy, and context, a useful visual model is to think about literacy as a tree with distinct but connected branches (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 The Media Literacy Family Tree
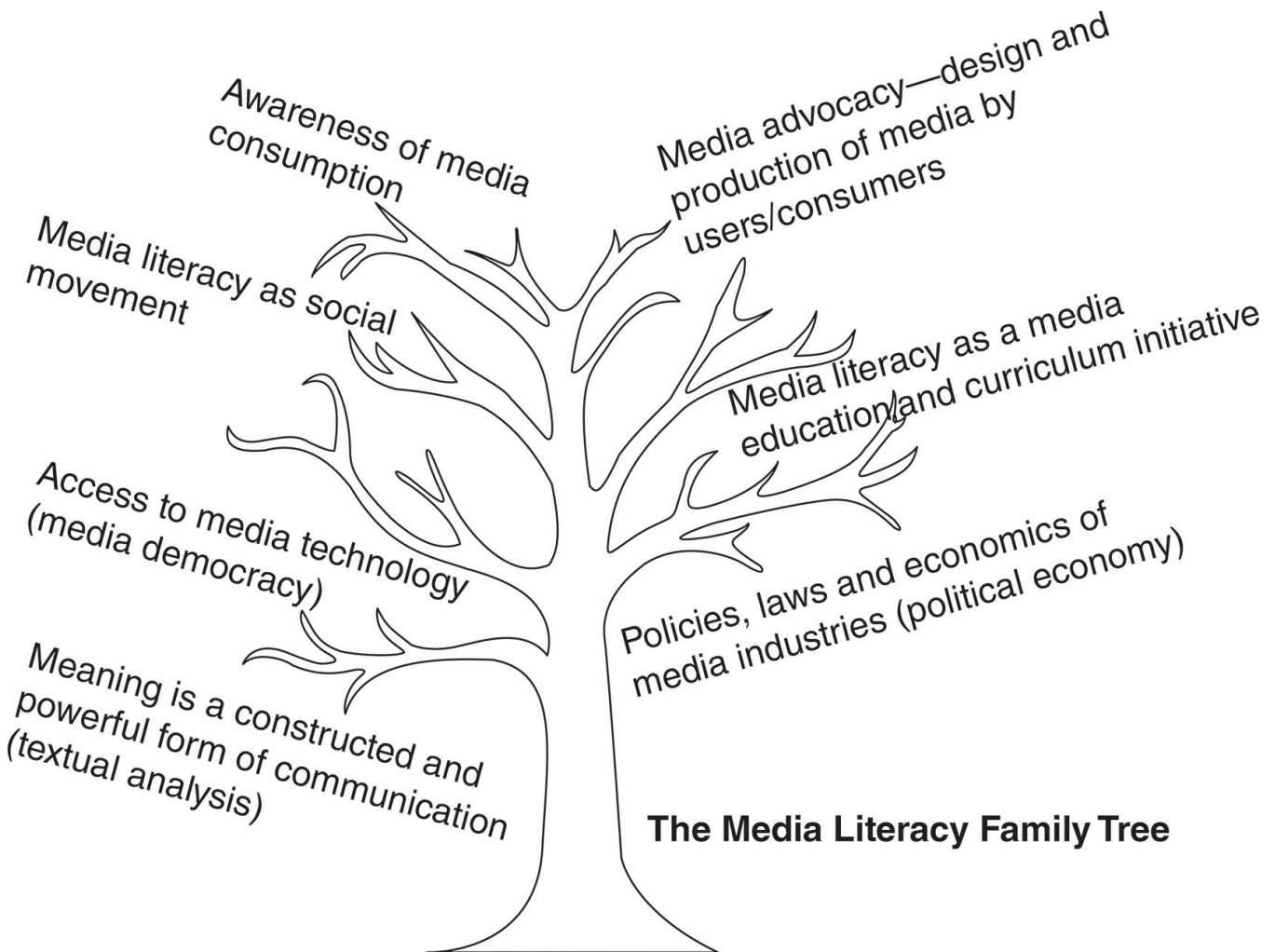
Source: Author created specifically for this entry.

The Value of Studying Media Literacy

Most citizens in technological societies live in a media saturated world, with nearly every moment of waking life filled with some kind of media consumption or computer/technology assisted communication (i.e., cell phones, group gaming devices, and social media, including Facebook or Instagram). However, these new media forms and technological skills do not necessarily make for a more informed, aware, healthy, and ethical life. Consumption of media messages, without a critical filter through which to understand representations, bias, stereotyping, or media ownership is a major concern of media educators, especially in this digital age where countless options for media consumption are available.

One of the first components of becoming media literate is to understand the habits and frequency of media consumption, which are often underestimated. Research indicates that in 2015, the average U.S. citizen consumed media more than 15.5 hours per day. Millennials (ages 18–36 years) report even higher media consumption levels (just under 18 hours per day on various different types of media). With such high rates of saturation, consumers are exposed to anywhere between 900 and 3,000 advertisements per day. People cannot escape the constant (and uninvited) onslaught of advertising and other messages.

Textual Analysis and Meaning

After understanding consumption habits, the next step is acquiring tools to understand and analyze the meanings of media messages. Media genres (e.g., reality or comedy), or programs (e.g., Survivor or Walking Dead), or a specific form (e.g., a song or website) are known as media texts. Media texts are contained units of meaning, which create and reinforce social norms, customs, and beliefs. Thus, media types or genres are powerful socializing agents. Media textual analysis is a literacy method to understand how media programs and messages make meaning and how those meanings are shared across demographics. Textual analysis is the process of decoding messages for overt and covert meanings (apparent and symbolic). Socialization is the process of learning to live within a particular culture or society, with its own values, norms, behaviors, and beliefs. Audiences often model the representations that they see or hear in media texts to fit into belief systems. These powerful images communicate how to fulfill certain roles (how women are supposed to behave), what we should achieve (portrayals of success), and how to behave (relationships, sexuality, and gender roles). Thus, media literacy explores the understanding of how meaning is created and embedded within media texts—often called encoding. In this sense, media literacy supports the examination of representation, misrepresentation (e.g., stereotyping), persuasion or manipulation (e.g., that in advertising, public relations, and bias or editorialized news). How messages are portrayed and the nuances of representation are enculturation processes for audience beliefs, values, and behaviors.

The content of media varies, but almost always media is specifically targeted to audiences based on demographics such as age, sex, or income. The goal of advertisers is not only to reach certain demographics but also target psychographic profiles—defined as lifestyle interests, tastes, and preferences. For example, entertainment and fashion magazines, websites, and television programs feature stories about celebrities, fashion styles, music fads, and gossip. These media texts have denotative meanings, defined as surface or

literal meanings. They also are supported by advertisements for diet pills, weight loss programs, and miracle beauty products. Such advertisements in combination with the pop culture portrayals are analyzed to explore connotative meanings, which are the sociocultural and personal associations (ideological or emotional), along with those related to class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or age. Media messages can have strong influence on body image, health, and well-being through connotative meanings.

An important foundation of media literacy is to understand how advertising works, as well as how other messages influence and persuade us to think, feel, and behave. Therefore, media education is also about being able to "read" or understand media texts beyond surface meanings.

Media Messages and the Constructions of Meaning

Literacy, including the skills of reading, writing, and speaking national languages, has been identified as an important skill in many countries. Literacy has been linked to power and influence, as well as disadvantage and marginality. Applying some of the same conclusions to mediated messages, the companies or organizations that create them, and the consumer/user's ability to interpret media messages, media literacy is more than knowledge, it is also the development of critical, analytic skills. Media literacy is being able to consciously consume, inquire, and think critically about media messages and forms, and understand why these messages and representations exist, while also learning the language to discuss media communication.

Meaning does not reside solely within the media text created by organizations; it also is generated from viewers, listeners, and users. Media reception and consumption are terms used to describe how audiences engage with media, and make meaning from their unique viewpoints. This perspective asserts that meaning lies mostly in the audience's understanding of, and interaction with, the media program or genre. Meaning is not the sole responsibility of media producers, not within the encoding of the text, and thus media reception emphasizes the importance of becoming media literate.

However, media forms and texts are not produced in a vacuum. Complex teams within organizations produce widely circulated media messages. These diverse media producers and institutions use professional norms, organizational practices, and ideological frameworks within policy and technology infrastructures. This might be thought of as the context of media production and distribution. A media literate citizen understands the social, political, and economic environments where media systems exist.

Political and Economic Media Literacy

Media messages are created by institutions and organizations, from smaller community media to very large multinational corporations like Time Warner or the Walt Disney Company. Media literacy advocates for research and understanding of media ownership, how it influences the programming available for audiences,

and how these large businesses interact with the state (e.g., government policies). Therefore, media literacy gained through the branch of political economy explores who or what organizations or social institutions produce and distribute media. The mainstream media industry is considered an oligopoly, where only a few, very large multinational companies dominate local, national, and global markets. This results in a media system where fewer independent voices (companies) can be competitive. It also results in media representations that are problematic—such as the continued privileging of some political or ideological perspectives or representations over others.

Media consolidation occurs when larger companies purchase other media companies (often smaller), thus merging business activities and strengthening their market position. What this leads to are fewer unique perspectives in our media world and a weakening of democracy. Large multinational corporations have significant influence on media policy or laws, and often are accused of placing profits above socially responsible media programming.

Media industries continue their explosive growth and evolution as emergent communication technologies permeate every part of modern life. Because of this immense influence on our individual and collective lives, it is important to be fully aware that:

- Media messages are constructed within cultural worldview(s).
- Media works as powerful form of socialization through persuasion, attitude formation, and enculturation.
- Audiences/users/consumers of media messages are "targeted" based on technology type, and purpose, usually by large conglomerate media corporations.
- Who produces and distributes mediated messages, and for what purpose (e.g., entertainment, profits, audience reach, education), influences socialization.

Just as our political or civic education allows us to think more critically and constructively about politics, civil society, and social norms, our media research methods should also educate us to think critically and constructively about media institutions, laws, and politics. Once we can critically observe media, we can engage in participatory media, which is the creation of our own media as individual citizens.

Media Literacy as Access, Activism, and Advocacy

Another component of media literacy refers to the ability to access and advocate for meaningful media, by developing the communication skills and opportunities to produce, consult on, and/or distribute media messages. Citizens can become part of media democracy when they use media for social good—organizing local and regional community projects, which allow citizens to express themselves using the tools of technology. Community television, blogs, and Internet radio are among the methods that promote democratic engagements with the media. Now that people have access to a wider range of tools and technologies to create their own media, it is important to understand media not only as means of powerful economic

and social influence but also as an engaged method for democratic communication. This media production exponentially grew with technological developments, such as Web 2.0, creating opportunities for citizens to create media and self-distribute. With YouTube, Vimeo, and social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others, citizens are the new content creators.

Media advocacy means that citizens learn how to develop media often ignored by the mainstream (and as a result overlooked by citizens in a democratic society). Media literate citizens can become effective agents of change, contribute to civic conversations, and communicate effectively through active involvement with media. Social media connects citizens across the global community, and there are limitless forms, uses, and means for this globalized media. Both prosocial and antisocial messages can be created and disseminated to mass audiences or users. Thus, scholars in media literacy have focused on media communication's ability to have both mainstream and alternative perspectives.

As the largest global exporter of news and entertainment, the United States has significant potential for influence in media literacy. The movement, however, starts with each person and their commitment to becoming media literate. To be literate in the digital age, one must be aware of his or her media consumption choices and frequency, as well as how one accesses and analyzes media. Media literacy is ultimately both a critical method for analyzing the media and one that encourages citizens to become increasingly aware of their role or potential role as producers of media content that circulates globally.

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See also Activism and Social Justice; Political Economy of Media; Textual Analysis

Further Readings

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