What Does Media (pl. of medium) Mean?

Media is the form in which something is conveyed, accomplished, or transferred to a large number of people. Examples of media include: magazines, newspapers, radio, television, billboards, graffiti, posters, logos, pamphlets or web pages.

Why Is Media Literacy Important Skill to Develop?

"Media literate people understand that television is constructed to convey ideas, information and news from someone else's perspective. They understand that specific techniques are used to create emotional effects. They can identify those techniques and their intended and actual effects. They are aware that all media benefit some people and leave others out. They can pose and sometimes answer questions about who are the beneficiaries, who is left out and why. Media literate people seek alternative sources of information and entertainment. Media literate people use television for their own advantage and enjoyment. Media literate people know how to act. They are not acted upon. In that way, media literate people are better citizens." (Kipping, P. (1989). Media Literacy — An Important Strategy for Building Peace. Peace Magazine. Toronto, Canada.)

General Media Literacy Practices

When engaging in critical analysis of any media message, it’s useful to ask some or all of the following questions:

1. Who made—and who sponsored—this message, and for what purpose?
2. Who is the target audience, and how is the message specifically tailored to that audience?
3. What are the different techniques used to inform, persuade, entertain, and attract attention?
4. What messages are communicated (and/or implied) about certain people, places, events, behaviors, lifestyles, etc.?
5. How current, accurate, and credible is the information in this message?
6. What is left out of this message that might be important to know?

"Why do Canadians seem to prefer American media?" The following alternative solutions might be investigated:

• Media content, from films to television, is predominantly American in origin.

• American programs are generally cheaper to buy; have better production values, which reflect lavish budgets; and have a faster pace than do most Canadian programs.

• Quality Canadian programs may reflect our identity, but most Canadians' indifference about or insecurity in this area compels them to avoid endeavours that hold up the mirror to our society.

• Intense competition in the United States ensures that only the most salable commercial products are seen.
These key concepts come into all media literacy activities to varying degrees.

1. All media are constructions. This is arguably the most important concept. The media do not simply reflect external reality. Rather, they present carefully crafted constructions that reflect many decisions and are the result of many determining factors. Media Literacy works towards deconstructing these constructions (i.e., to taking them apart to show how they are made).

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 preconstructed and have attitudes, interpretations, and conclusions already built in. Thus the media, to a great extent, give us our sense of reality.

3. Audiences negotiate meaning in media. If the media provides us with much of the material upon which we build our picture of reality, each of us finds or "negotiates" meaning according to individual factors: personal needs and anxieties, the pleasures or troubles of the day, racial and sexual attitudes, family and cultural background, moral standpoint, and so forth.

4. Media messages have commercial implications. Media literacy aims to encourage awareness of how the media are influenced by commercial considerations, and how they impinge on content, technique, and distribution. Most media production is a business, and so must 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 messages contain ideological and value messages. All media products are advertising in some sense proclaiming values and ways of life. The mainstream media convey, explicitly or implicitly, ideological messages about such issues as the nature of the good life and the virtue of consumerism, the role of women, the acceptance of authority, and unquestioning patriotism.

6. Media messages contain social and political implications. The media have great influence in politics and in 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 have become McLuhan's Global Village.

7. Form and content are closely related in media messages. 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.
In order to discuss the media and to learn more about it, we need a set of guidelines or concepts, which apply to any medium. These key concepts are the main tools we can use to think critically about the media.

1. All media are constructions. The media do not present simple reflections of what is around us. Rather, the media present carefully crafted productions that are the result of many decisions and determining factors. These are made by people with specific ends in mind. Technically, these productions are often excellent, and this, coupled with our familiarity with such productions, make it difficult for us to see such productions as anything other than a seamless extension of reality.

Len Masterman offered an example of this when he wrote about a Nottingham art teacher, Fred Bazler. "Fred held up to a class of eight-year-olds a painting of a horse and asked them what it was. When the kids answered, "A horse," Fred simply said it wasn't. This caused some confusion, but after a little prompting the children began to understand the distinction between a horse and its representation in a painting."

The critical viewer's task is to make these seams visible. We have to learn to take apart these constructions to see how they were made much like we might have taken apart toys when we were younger to see how they were put together. TV sitcoms like Sports Night, Newsradio, and Murphy Brown are set in television or radio stations. We know that we are watching fiction but we tend to forget it as we get caught up in the storyline. By using any number of production techniques — camera angles, editing, sound — the show can be made to present a certain view that may not be the entire truth. The critical viewer needs to be aware of these techniques.

2. The media construct reality. What the media are constructing is a certain representation of reality. We all have our own view of reality. We've been building it since the day we were born. The question is, where do we get it from? Much of it, other than what we experience for ourselves, comes from television, radio, newspapers, film, magazines. The media are responsible for most of the observations and experiences from which we build up our personal understandings of the world and how it works. Thus the media, rather than ourselves, to a great extent, give us our sense of reality.

Much of our view of reality is based on media messages that have been preconstructed and have attitudes, interpretations, and conclusions built in. The New York Times Magazine reported on September 20, 1998: "So much information is discerned through it, so much experience formed by it, that television has become as real as anything outside of itself."

There was a frightening illustration of this phenomenon when passengers of a cruise ship learned that their ship was on fire only when they turned on their television sets to a local news station. The fire was being broadcast live.

There are many shows on TV about doctors but which of these tells us what it is really like to be a doctor? Emergency rooms may (or may not) be the non-stop action that takes place weekly on ER. The health system in the United States may (or may not) be in the terrible shape that Chicago Hope, ER, Diagnosis Murder, and L.A. Doctors make it out to be. The images look so real that we can be lulled into thinking that they are real. Jack Solomon points out in his book, The Signs of Our Time: "Since we see them, we trust them, often failing to realize that, like all signs, they have been constructed with a certain interest behind them."
3. Audiences negotiate meaning in media. Basic to an understanding of media is an awareness of how we interact with media texts (TV shows, movies, radio programs, newspapers, the Internet). The second key concept concentrates on the ways in which the media contribute to the construction of reality. But we also have to realize that each of us brings something unique to the media — ourselves. If the media provide us with much of the material upon which we build our picture of reality, each of us finds or "negotiates" meaning according to individual factors: personal needs and anxieties, the pleasures or troubles of the day, racial and sexual attitudes, family and cultural background, moral standpoint, and so forth. All of these will affect our interpretation of what we are watching on television. And because each of us brings with us such different experiences, we have to be open to the fact that different people will experience the same television show in different ways.

Watching a sitcom like That ’70s Show is a very different experience for someone who grew up in the 1970s than it is for a 1990s teenager. The show is filled with references, styles, and attitudes that are totally foreign to someone who did not live through the period. Both groups may laugh at what they see, but they are probably laughing for different reasons. Or if O’Malley and I — two people the same age — were to watch CTV’s new hockey drama, Power Play, our reactions would be coloured by the simple fact that he enjoys the sport while I have no interest in it. And the way African-Americans react to portrayals of their race on shows like The Hughleys is significantly different from the way other races will react.

4. Media messages have commercial implications. Most media production is a business, and must make a profit. The economic basis of television has a very real effect on content, technique and distribution. Networks look for audiences to be delivered to sponsors. Program content makes viewers targets for advertisers and organizes them into marketable groups.

People who watch soap operas, for example, can also purchase magazines that summarize plots, follow the lives of the actors in the tabloids, and exchange gossip with fans over the Internet. Sport fans can buy memorabilia and star-endorsed products, play fantasy versions of the game on the Internet, or read about the sport in the newspaper. In a real way, such people are constructing their own fantasy universe based on a favorite show such as Star Trek, Baywatch or Monday Night Football. The question to ask is how much of their own personality is shaped by such commercial forces?

Questions of ownership and control are central: a relatively small number of individuals control what we watch, read and hear in the media. The companies involved here are Time/Warner, Disney, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, General Electric, Tele-Communications Inc., Viacom and CBS. This concentration of ownership has far-reaching implications for how we perceive our world and our place in it.

Media messages contain ideological and value messages. All media products proclaim values and ways of life. And that way of life and those values are usually those of the established social structure. This makes sense when you consider that the media and advertisers are the chief beneficiaries of the established social structure.

The mainstream media convey, explicitly or implicitly, ideological messages about issues such as the nature of the good life and the virtue of consumerism (King of Queens), the role of women and men in society (Veronica’s Closet, Everybody Loves Raymond and Suddenly Susan), the acceptance of authority (Working), and unquestioning patriotism (JAG or Pensacola: Wings of Gold). While the media may not be directly responsible for creating values and attitudes, they legitimate and reinforce them. The critical viewer tries to uncover these ideological messages and values-systems by looking out for such issues as what groups are represented, what groups are left out — for example there are very few older people in the current season of sitcoms.
Concentration of media ownership is also important in this respect. The ideologies, values and attitudes portrayed on television are those of the people who decide what to put on television. If they are conservatives (big "C" or small "c"), their messages will be much different than if they were liberals (big "L", small "l").

5. Media messages have social and political implications. The media have great influence in politics and in forming social change. Television can affect the election of a national leader on the basis of image. This has been clear since the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debate. The media also involve us in concerns such as civil rights and social issues, sitcoms bring gay characters out of the closet and make them socially acceptable. Other programs may deal with the effects of global warming, environmental issues, famines in Africa, and the AIDS epidemic. They can give us an intimate sense of national issues and global concerns making us indeed McLuhan's Global Village.

Political parties use television because this is where the voters are. No campaign rally can attract the number of voters that will see a candidate on the evening news. Politicians speak in sound bites to make the news. The biggest single cost in political campaigning is for television ads. While the ads reach a great many people, they can also backfire. In the 1993 federal election, the Progressive Conservative party went from being a majority government in power to a defeat that cost them all but two of their parliamentary seats. There were many reasons for this stunning defeat but some observers believe that a critical error was a television spot aired just before the election. As Macleans reported in May 19, 1997, the 30-second spot "...showed unflattering photographs of Liberal leader Jean Chretien. The images emphasized his contorted mouth, the result of a birth defect, while the ad asked: 'Is this a prime minister?'" The ad provoked immediate outrage from politicians.

In the United States, the Lewinsky scandal was tawdry but, as the New York Times Magazine reminded us on September 20, 1998, "...it is also an irresistible story of sex and power, and television's unblinking focus on it is playing an active role in Presidential politics and governance."

6. Form and content are closely related in media messages. As Marshall McLuhan noted, "The medium is the message." Each medium has its own grammar and bias and codifies reality in its own particular way. Thus, different media reporting the same event will create different impressions and different messages. For example, television works best with images. Therefore, the evening news will be more likely to show fires, earthquakes, and rioting protesters than the latest round of talks between the nurse's union and the hospital authorities. A newspaper or magazine cannot show live pictures, but they can give you a more detailed background on why a fire started or what were the issues that caused the riot. To see this concept in action read today's paper, listen to today's news on the radio, and watch the evening TV news. They will present, more or less, the same subjects but there will be a great difference in how they present them.

7. Each medium has a unique aesthetic form. Media education is not only about understanding media texts and their implications for our culture and society, but also about how to enjoy and produce them. 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. Our enjoyment of media can be enhanced by an awareness of how pleasing forms or effects are created. Television is at its best with live events. There is an extra thrill and pleasure in watching a sporting event live on television that cannot be got from reading about it or watching a replay of it after it is over. And television offers a real sense of sharing and participation in its coverage of world events like the opening of the Olympics or the funeral of Princess Diana.

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