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Media Literacy

by Andrew Smiler

American youth grow up with easy and regular access to media. These media are not inert products that may be mostly ignored; much of media content actively seeks to attract our attention and communicate a message. As such, it is important that we help them understand the underlying messages and become wise to the ways that media producers try to influence behavior. In this article, I explore the definition, importance, and benefits of media literacy, and present key questions to guide youth and adults as they engage with media.



What is Media Literacy?

At the most basic and broadest level, media literacy refers to the ability to understand the content of any medium – print, audio, video, or other – at both the surface and deeper levels. The surface level refers to the direct or manifest message being transmitted. Deeper levels address a broad variety of other messages that may range from “traditional” storytelling devices such as foreshadowing and allusion to more “modern” questions such as who is telling this story and what (or who) has been left out?

Given its breadth, media literacy may be better understood as a set of skills that can be applied to any medium. The National Association for Media Literacy Education, for example, defines media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in a variety of forms, including print and non-print messages.”

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Why is Media Literacy Important?

Media is Pervasive

In our increasingly connected world, it is nearly impossible to go a full day without using or experiencing some type of media. Imagine a day without reading (email, blogs, billboards, books, magazines), listening to recorded music (radio, streaming), watching recorded video (TV, DVD, streaming), or playing a video game (handheld, console, internet). Screens are increasingly common in all sorts of restaurants and large retailers. The use of most cell phones requires at least a basic level of media literacy: identifying the correct icon in order to open the desired app or function.

The statistics help fill out the picture.

- **Radio/Music:** Nearly all teens listen to music and, as one research team put it, “listening to popular music is properly seen as a natural and generally benign part of growing up in contemporary Western society” (Roberts & Christenson, 2001, p. 398).
- **TV/Video:** More than 98% of U.S. households have at least one TV (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008); the average number of sets per household was 2.5 in 2010 (Nielsen, 2011). Approximately 90% of households have cable or satellite service (Nielsen, 2012).
- **Cell phones:** In 2011, approximately 87% of 14-17 year olds had some type of cell phone and nearly one-third of that age group owned a smartphone. Rates were somewhat lower among 12-13 year olds (Lenhart, 2012).

Information regarding access and ownership is straightforward, but understanding use is more difficult. Part of the challenge is that people often use multiple media at the same time. Many people routinely play music or have the TV turned on as background while performing other activities, such as completing homework, texting, playing a video game, or using a graphic design program. We might then ask to what extent an individual is really “using” that background medium. Among teens, estimates suggest averages of 2-3 hours of television per day, 15-30 minutes of music videos per week, and 5 hours of music per day (Kistler, Rodgers, Power, Austin, & Hill, 2010; Ter Bogt, Engels, Bogers, & Kloosterman, 2010).

Media Influences Behavior

Given media’s pervasive presence in the lives of adolescents, some researchers have begun to refer to it as a “super peer” (Brown, Halpern, & L’Engle, 2006). The term can be used to refer to the ability of media to give teens common points of conversation (e.g., favorites) as well as media’s ability to set behavioral norms.

The most famous approach to understanding media’s effects may be Cultivation Theory, proposed by George Gerbner and his colleagues in the 1970s (Gerbner et al., 2002). Noting that television shows rely on a small number of storylines repeated with infinite variations, the theory argues that repeated and heavy exposure leads people to believe the real world behaves like the world-on-TV. Although today’s

Example: Cumulative Effects

One research team found that teens who preferred violent content across four or more different media (TV, movies, music, magazines, internet) were substantially more likely to perpetrate or be the victim of dating violence one to two years later; odds were much lower among those who preferred violence in three or fewer formats (Friedlander et al., 2013).



media are more varied in content and storylines, the basic premise holds, particularly when a single genre is examined.

Other approaches focus on how and why people use particular forms of media. Issues of active vs. passive engagement, identification with particular characters or individuals, perceived realism, viewing motives, and interpretation of media messages have been examined, and each has an effect on adolescent consumers. These factors can impact an individual's understanding and incorporation of media and thus may impact a teen's beliefs, behaviors, or identity (Ward, 2003).

What Can Media Literacy Achieve?

Media literacy programs usually attempt to help children and adolescents accomplish two goals: 1) understand how the media communicates and 2) examine the messages regarding a specific topic, such as nutrition and body image (Espinoza, Penelo, & Raich, 2013), alcohol and drugs (Chen, 2013; Kupersmidt, Scull, & Benson, 2012), or sexuality (Pinkleton et al., 2008). Depending on the program's specific goals and the adolescents participating in the program, benefits may include gains in knowledge, more critical viewing, and/or changes in attitudes, intended behavior, or actual behavior. Evidence-based programs lead to behavioral change that may persist for as long as 30 months (Espinoza et al., 2013); effects may differ for girls and boys based on the program's approach (Chen, 2013).

Helping Youth Think Critically about Media Content

There are several questions that young people can ask – and answer – about the media they're interacting with. Questions may need to be adjusted for an individual's understanding and experience with a given topic. The Center for Media Literacy offers these five key questions, each of which relates to a key concept.

Questions about the latent or deeper content of the message, including knowledge about who is sending the message and why they're doing that.

1. Who created this message? (Concept: all messages are constructed)
2. What lifestyles, values, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message? (Concept: Media presents some lifestyles, values, and perspectives while omitting others)
3. Why is this message being sent? (Most media are designed to gain profit or power)

I recommend separating question 2 into its component parts and specifically asking "what is represented" and "what is left out." Teens who are relatively inexperienced with a topic may have more difficulty identifying omissions. Specific questions about power dynamics or the presence of risk and safety messages can help identify

Evaluating Websites

Students regularly seek information on the web, and need to know how to determine whether a site is trustworthy or not. Project Look Sharp provides questions and clues to help.

Separating Fact and Fiction: Examining the Credibility of Information on the Internet

https://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp/?action=webresources_websites

unspoken content, while questions such as “what would you do in that situation” can facilitate problem solving.

For example, the prototypical 30-second beer commercial includes care-free fun by attractive 20-somethings who demonstrate some level of heterosexual attraction (or flirting), with a very brief reminder to be safe. Developed by large corporations, these commercials sell a lifestyle that goes beyond a brand/ flavor, but is limited to young heterosexual adults. Men are shown actively doing things while women simply look attractive (Strate, 1992). Negatives such as cost, hangovers, and the potential for addiction are not addressed and the “please drink responsibly” message does little to counter any aspect of the commercial.

Questions about the audience.

4. How might other people understand this message differently from me? (Concept: different people often experience the same message differently)

Embedded within this question is another question: who is the target audience? To the extent that media are selling a particular message, or are trying to attract a particular audience for their advertisers, we can consider who that audience is. We might then ask if the message would be understood the same way for different groups based on their gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, social status (e.g., jocks, nerds), etc. Intersections or combinations among these groups can further refine the analysis.

Questions about how the medium works.

5. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention? (Concept: what rules does this message follow)

We all know that ominous, creepy music in horror films is a cue that something bad is about to happen. We also know that many television shows include a “laugh track.” In addition to these aspects of the soundtrack, we might ask about volume, lighting, camera angles and styles, and other production techniques. What message is being sent without words? One of the common messages is simply “pay attention,” but other messages about what (or who) is good/bad are often transmitted this way. For a TV show with a laugh track, we might ask if the audience’s reaction matches our own or if the audience favors one character over another, and why.

Conclusion

We are embedded in a media-saturated world, from icons through feature-length movies. By teaching adolescents to ask a few simple questions, we can help them gain a better, deeper understanding of the explicit and implicit content they’re being exposed to. From this understanding, they will be better able to connect to messages that fit their values and sense of self, and resist messages that do not. ★

Working with Youth Creatively

One way to help teens think through these issues is to ask them to create media of their own.

- In 2013, the video of Robin Thicke’s “Blurred Lines” was widely spoofed online. The original contains a fully dressed Thicke and a variety of nearly naked young adult women; many spoofs altered that dynamic in ways that highlighted the gender, sexual, and age dynamics on display.
- Bill Taverner (2007) suggests a simple activity that can be done in any setting and does not require any equipment. He suggests asking teens to rewrite and perform popular songs so they provide a healthier message.

Resources

Media Literacy Project (MLP) provides resources and education, including training resources. MLP is rooted in a media justice/social justice perspective.

<http://medialiteracyproject.org/>

Center for Media Literacy is an educational organization that provides leadership, public education, professional development, and educational resources.

<http://www.medialit.org/>

National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) is an educational organization whose goal is to “expand and improve the practice of media literacy education in the United States.” NAMLE publishes educational materials and the peer-reviewed *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, and hosts a biennial conference.

<http://namle.net/>

Women’s Media Center is focused specifically on women’s representation in the media, particularly news media. They examine content as well as women’s roles delivering and producing media content.

<http://www.womensmediacenter.com/content>

Media Education Foundation produces and distributes documentary films and other educational resources to inspire critical thinking about the social, political, and cultural impact of American mass media. Many of the films are accompanied by study guides and other curricular items.

<http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?display=home>

Adbusters works to change the way information flows and the way meaning is produced in our society. They produce spoof ads, a bi-monthly magazine without advertising (“Adbusters”), and campaigns such as “Buy Nothing Day.”

<https://www.adbusters.org/>

Project Look Sharp provides lesson plans, media materials, and training for the effective integration of media literacy into the classroom.

<http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp/>

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